234 life. Such a life nurtures the qualities of the shepherd—courage, love of fighting, and contempt of hunger and hardship—rather than shapes the industrious character of the peasant.

IV

262 Nuer are also interested in their cattle for meat, boiled and
•782 roasted. They do not raise herds for slaughter, but sheep and
231 oxen are frequently sacrificed at ceremonies. There are always
ghosts and spirits in whose honour a sacrifice would at any time be appropriate, and such sacrifices are generally long overdue, so that there does not lack a proper excuse for a feast when people desire one. Fertile cows are sacrificed in mortuary rites, but, otherwise, only barren females are killed. At sacrifices most people are interested more in the festal than the religious character of the rites. Sometimes, as at marriage ceremonies, the people who perform the ritual are different from those who eat the meat, while at other ceremonies there is a general scramble for the carcass. Desire for meat is shown without shame on these occasions, and Nuer recognize that some men sacrifice without due cause. In some years it is a custom in the rains for young men to join together at a homestead with the purpose of slaughtering oxen and gorging themselves with meat. Except on such occasions, however, people ought not to kill an ox solely for food—it being even thought that the ox may curse them—and they only do so in severe famine. The Lou, who are rich in cattle, have a reputation, of which they are rather ashamed, for killing oxen for meat. Nevertheless, nowhere in Nuerland are cattle ordinarily slaughtered for food, and a man would never kill even a sheep or goat merely on the grounds that he desired meat. On occasions of minor importance sheep or goats are sacrificed rather than oxen, as they are less valuable.

231 Any animal which dies a natural death is eaten. Even when
262 a youth's favourite ox dies he must be persuaded to partake
of its flesh, and it is said that were he to refuse his spear might avenge the insult by cutting his foot or hand on some future occasion. Nuer are very fond of meat, and declare that on the death of a cow, 'The eyes and the heart are sad, but the teeth and the stomach are glad.' 'A man's stomach prays to God, independently of his mind, for such gifts.'

14: Huffman M-5 (no date) 1931
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

'When God created the people, he created man, and he 773 created the cow, and dura for the people to eat, and goats to eat. He made a spear and a fish-spear, and a dancing stick, such a one as is wrapped with gold. He made the elephant, giraffe, buffalo, teang, waterbuck, reed-buck and gazelle—the yellow and white one, the pig, the cattle-eating lion and the man-eating lion, the hyena, the leopard, the civet-cat and the fox, the rat, the crocodile and hippopotamus, the fish, turtle and snake, the heglig, nabag and ardeb trees, the talh tree, the deleb palm, the kwar and lwal trees.

'And God said to the men: "You are my children, whom I have created; you are four, this is the Dinka, this is the Shilluk, this is the Nubian, and this man shall rule over you; he has the gun, his name is Cwalcotke, he is also called the Turk. He has no cows, but you shall be caught by him, he shall govern."'

Prayers and sacrifices are offered to Kot on important 782 incidents of life. Here is a prayer for a sick person: 'Oh God, let the man recover, let him become well, that he may get strength again. God, what is this? Leave the sick one with us, let him recover. Return to thine own body. Take thy cow, for she was ordered for the deliverance of souls. It is thee thyself who said thus. Take the cow that she may deliver the soul of the sick one. It is thou who created us, it is the cow that delivers souls. Here is the goat, and the wild cucumber. Let him recover! In what have we wronged? Give us the soul of the sick one. Thou art our father. Why shall we suffer from sickness all days? Give us the soul, we pray thee, our great-grandfather.'

At a burial the following prayer is offered: 'Oh God, why dost thou pursue us? Return thyself, take this thy dead man and go; let him be sufficient, do not look at us

782 again. In what have we failed?' Then a cow is speared, and the chief continues praying: 'Oh God, take thy cow. And you [dead man] turn away, do not look at us again. We will give you your own things, but then leave us alone.' The wife of the deceased is now given to another male member of his family with these words: 'Bear children by her, that their fire may be raised up [that their family may not be extinguished], and their family may be able to manage their own affairs.'

A prayer by the chief for a woman in travail: 'God, what is it? why can the woman not bear? It is thou who has ordered the woman to bear children, that she may create descendants, that the man's family may be preserved.'

789
233 An important annual event is the bringing of the cattle across the river, where they find better pasturage. For this the help of the sorcerer is sought. He has to find a propitious day for the transaction and to perform the necessary magic rites. He spends the night before in making witchcraft, and the following morning he prays: 'Oh God, it is thou who said that I should be sorcerer, I should do witchcraft, I should bewitch the crocodile. The cattle has no more grass, let the cattle go across the river that they may graze on yonder shore. Oh God, it is thou who created the cow, that man might be nourished by her, let them swim safely across.' When the cows have been brought to the crossing-place, the sorcerer invokes the river or the spirit presiding over the river: 'Thou river of a certain man, let the cattle go across safely, all of them, let them reach the shore safely, let no one be touched by the crocodile. We are making a bargain.' As a ram is brought, he goes on saying: 'Take it, O river!' The ram's mouth is tied, so he goes to the river with it, and drives it into the water. Now the

Chapter Seven

SOME NOTES ON RELIGION, SUPERSTITIONS, AND MORAL LAW

NUER GODS

776 THE Nuer has long feared and worshipped he knows not what. There are various gods, Deng, Wiu, Cwol, and others. Some have power over rain, some over crops, disease, death, or lightning.

778 825 Some animals are considered sacred, but what is sacred to one man is not necessarily held sacred by another. It may be the crocodile, or the land crocodile, or a certain kind of snake. Every Nuer is certain to have a sacred animal which he will neither kill nor eat.

● 782 Sheep and cattle are sacrificed on various grounds in order to appease one god or another.

[776] 766 When a person is struck by lightning and killed he is said to have been taken by the god of lightning—Cwol. His body is laid upon a rack that is made in his house or barn and then covered entirely—over, under, and on all sides—with wood, ash, and soil. The door of the house is closed and the house is left desolate except for its silent owner. A person who has been struck and killed by lightning is never buried in the ground as others are.

784 No one will touch a person who has been stunned by lightning until he regains consciousness, for fear the god in him may be transmitted by contact.

778 A Nuer always considers the relatives of one who has been killed by lightning as sacred.

[826] [789] Any one who has some physical or mental deformity may be considered as having a god in him and be regarded as sacred and avoided for that reason.

781 The Nuer worship is a worship of fear. The missionary feels as if he were living in Old Testament times, and

15: Butt E-6 (No date) 1952 F322 Nuer F324

ashes from it are smeared over the body. Cattle urine is used in churning and cheese-making and also for washing. Evans-Pritchard rightly calls the Nuer 'parasites of the cow'.(1) 257

The social importance of cattle among the Nuer

The fact that cattle have more than an economic value may be amply illustrated from the part they play in social life. 291

Relationships with neighbouring tribal groups are partly dependent on the value attached to cattle. [721] The Nuer are contemptuous of those who have no cattle, while they raid those who have in order that they may augment their own herds. A man will defend his cattle to the last and will die for the sake of the herds. Disputes within the Nuer tribe are often about [691] cattle and about the ownership of pastures and water supplies necessary for their well-being. Cattle are paid in compensation for homicide and injury. It is the needs of the cattle which compel the yearly dry-season migration to fresh pastures.

Cattle form the bridewealth of the Nuer, that is, the successive trans- [593] fers of cattle from the bridegroom's family to that of the bride marking the fact of marriage. Cattle are farmed out among friends as a precaution against the total destruction of a herd by disease; thus they tend to con- [672] solidate friendships and to maintain the network of relationships between people within a village and between the inhabitants of separate villages.

Family relationships are expressed in terms of cattle, as are the rules of incest and the status of an individual. Men take 'ox-names' - [561] names which refer to the colour or other peculiarities of their favourite animals. In ritual cattle play an important part; they are sacrificed to the spirits and, when he desires to establish contact with ghosts and spirits, a man rubs ashes along the back of an animal, invoking the ancest- [792] ral spirits as he does so. Cows are dedicated to the totemic spirits and the sky spirits. Daily life revolves round the needs of cattle; Nuer think cattle and talk cattle. Oxen are valued for display and prestige, and the merits of their favourite beasts are boasted of by their owners. Nuer language is rich in terms describing the various attributes of cattle. [192] Tassels, decorations and carved tethering pegs are made by the owners, while the favourites in the herd will be played with, sung to and have poems made up about them. Young men will get boys to lead their favourite ox round the village for all to admire and will themselves leap behind it. Among the Nuer there is scarcely any aspect of life into which cattle do not enter and play an important part. Evans-Pritchard writes that the Nuer define all social processes and relationships in terms of cattle and that their social idiom is a bovine idiom.

---

(1) Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer*, 1940, p.30.

respected; it is the spiritual being, the *kwoth*, which the totem stands for, which is revered. The totems are symbols or manifestations of a spirit which can be in communion with men and beasts.(1) 776

Totem spirits are called *kuth piny* (earth spirits) a category which includes fetishes; this is in contrast to the much more important *kuth nhial*, sky spirits. Yet, although the two categories are thus distinguished, the Nuer maintain that they worship totemic spirits and that these spirits are with god in the sky. The totem seems to be the symbol of the spirit and the spirit to be an aspect of the spirit of the sky which is connected with the various lineages and is symbolised differently in each.

Kwoth

In addition to totemic spirits, *kwoth* also refers to 'god in the sky' and can mean any one of the sons of the sky god - the *kwoth dwanga*. Each sky spirit is associated with a certain aspect of nature; for example, Deng refers to tthe rain spirit. Another group of spirits are the *col wic* - the spirits of persons who have been killed by lightning and taken up to heaven. Persons supposed to have been taken into heaven by a whirlwind and those found dead in the bush without any apparent cause are also *col wic*. A *col wic* is considered to be a sacred spirit of his lineage - a *kwoth gwol* - and most lineages have at least one of these spirits to whom cows are dedicated. Sometimes a *col wic* spirit enters into a member of his family or lineage and, when this happens, the man whom he possesses falls sick; on rrecovery, he makes a shrine in his homestead and becomes a prophet of Col *(guk cwol)*, and the spirit of lightning contacts the people through him.(2) [791]

SACRIFICES

Sacrifices pplay an important part in all ritual practices, and are usually all of a similar nature. An animal is selected and is dedicated to a spirit by rrubbing ashes along its back. An invocation is then made and the animal iss killed by spearing it through the heart. It is cut in two halves when tthere is a cutting of social ties, and also at mortuary ceremonies when tthere is one half for the living and another for the dead. Sickness is the most frequent occasion for sacrifices. 782

THE CONCEPTS OF THEK AND NUER

Thek means '(to respect', and is used in various social contexts; for example, it denotes the behaviour expected of a man towards his parents-in-law; in blood feuds the kin of the slayer and of the slain may not eat from the utensils which the other party has used, and these are respected. In mortuary ceremonies a man's age-mates *thek* the meat which has been sacrificed in his honour. A man also pays respect to his totem. Failure to show respect where there is a *thek* relationship is thought to bring about misfortune.(3) Any serious sickness following the breach of a *thek* taboo is callled *nueer*. 576 [753]

---

(1) Evans-Pritchard, *Annali Lateranensi*, 1949, Vol.XIII, p.247.
(2) Evans-Pritchard, *Man*, 1949, No.2, p.9.
(3) *Ibid.*, 1949, NoNo.96, p.75.

Cien

753 775 *Cien* is the vengeance wrought by a ghost which produces sickness and misfortune; like the other Nilotic tribal groups, the Nuer hold the concept of *cien*, and believe that ghostly vengeance will fall on those who have wronged a man and allowed him to die with a grudge. Fear of *cien* tends to make a Nuer more careful to treat others with justice.

[782] To stop the effects of *cien* it is necessary to make a sacrifice to god in the sky and, when possible, to make reparation.

NUER CURSES AND GHOSTLY VENGEANCE

789 Curses are uttered by someone who has been wronged. The efficacy of a curse is largely conditioned by the relationship of the curser to the cursed. The Nuer regard the curse of a mother or father as serious; it may result in death. The curse of a mother's brother is feared because, being of a different lineage, he may curse cattle, which is the worst of all curses in the eyes of the Nuer. The curse of an eldest child is feared by the mother and maternal uncle.

There are other curses imposed by those of the *ric* (age-set), by the leopard-skin chief, the man of the cattle and god, the prophet.(1) The Nuer also believe in conditional curses which may be laid on a man and become operative if he, or any of his descendants, should do a certain thing.

RITUAL PERSONS

791 There are several ritual figures among the Nuer who are important in the village community.

1. *The Leopard-Skin Chiefs.* They have a special relationship with the earth and can affect the welfare of the crops. They also have a limited role in rain-making and in the general regulation of the weather. They conduct the rituals concerned with homicide, with cleansing the parties to incestuous relations, with preventing feuds, and protecting warriors on raiding expeditions.

2. *The Wut Ghok.* Members of certain lineages have hereditary ritual powers in relation to cattle; they are asked to cure cows of various diseases and to ensure the fertility of barren animals. Their role is, however, a more restricted one than that of the leopard-skin chief, who has functions relating to social as well as to natural processes. Usually the wut *ghok* is a member of a stranger lineage, as is the leopard-skin chief, and this is presumably an advantage when they have to mediate between powerful and antagonistic lineages.

3. *Totemic Experts.* There are a number of totemic experts whose ritual connections with lions, crocodiles, and other dangerous creatures, enable them to influence the beasts' behaviour to the advantage of the community. A totemic specialist is the possessor of the spirit of his totem; he has no political significance.

---

(1) Evans-Pritchard, *Africa*, 1949, XIX, p.289.

* 776 577 may bring about evil consequences through either an expressed curse or a silent curse contained in anger and resentment (pp. 163-73), though the misfortunes which follow are regarded by Nuer as coming ultimately from God, who supports the cause of the man who has the *cuong*, the right in the matter, and punishes the person who is at fault (*dwir*), for it is God alone who makes a curse operative. Nuer are quite explicit on this point. What, then, Nuer ideas on the matter amount to is, in our way of putting it, that if a man wishes to be in the right with God he must be in the right with men, that is, he must subordinate his interests as an individual to the moral order of society. A man must honour his father and his father's age-mates, a wife must obey her husband, a man must respect his wife's kin, and so on. If an individual fails to observe the rules he is, Nuer say, *yong*, crazy, because he not only loses the support of kith and kin but also the favour of God, so that retribution in one form or another and sooner or later is bound to follow. Therefore Nuer, who are unruly and quarrelsome people, avoid, in so far as they can restrain themselves, giving gratuitous offence. Therefore, also, a man who is at fault goes to the person he has offended, admits the fault, saying to him '*ca dwir*', 'I was at fault', and he may also offer a gift to wipe out the offence. The wronged man then blesses him by spitting or blowing water on him and says that it is nothing and may the man be at peace. He thereby removes any resentment he may have in his heart. Nuer say that God sees these acts and frees the man from the consequences of his fault. ● [782] Similarly, the consequences of faults which are more directly of a religious order, like the breach of an interdiction or the neglect of some spirit, may be avoided by a timely sacrifice, though Nuer say that sacrifice without contrition is of no use. But—and this is the point I want to bring out here—the fact that the consequences of a fault can be stayed by contrition and reparation shows that the consequences of wrong-doing are not thought to be automatic.

That this is so, and there is a moral, and therefore uncertain and alterable, element involved is further shown by another fact. In estimating the likelihood, or degree, of misfortune that may be expected to follow from an act, Nuer take deliberation into the reckoning. They distinguish between *duer* and *gwac*. The word *duer*, as we have seen, means a fault, and it normally implies that the fault was deliberate, though, as will be seen later, this is not

barren, or divorced, woman to men to tell them that they would 776 ^x
live for ever, but, in delivering her message, she threw, instead of 577
a piece of gourd, a potsherd into the water, and it sank. Almost 773
fortuitous though this incident was, what had happened, as we 177
have noted before, could not be made not to have happened. Men
have to accept the consequences of actions whether they are
deliberate or not.

Hence when Nuer suffer misfortune they ponder how it may 776 ^x
have come about, for it follows from what has just been said and 577
from the fact we noted earlier that God is always in the right, that 782 ●
if misfortune comes to a man it is most likely on account of some 777
fault. This is why on such occasions one hears so often in Nuer prayers and invocations the plaint 'what have we done?' or 'what evil have we done?' and why Nuer sacrifices are so often propitiations, expiations, atonements, and purifications. It is therefore probable that suffering usually entails a measure of guilt. Nuer search their consciences to discover what fault might have brought it on them, though this is more evident when a misfortune is only pending and may yet be stayed or though it has fallen may yet be mitigated, for if the fault can be determined they will know better what action to take. When the misfortune is complete and their condition can in no way be alleviated they are less interested in its cause and accept its accomplishment with sorrow and resignation.

When Nuer suffer they sometimes at once know what is the 776 ^x
cause of their suffering because they are well aware of some 577
particular fault. They sometimes, as we would say, tempt God by 777
doing what they know to be wrong, hoping that it will not matter very much, such as having relations with a woman which are incestuous but not very incestuous. If trouble comes they know that this is the cause, for they have said that whether the relationship was too close for congress would be decided by any consequences of it. They now discover that it was more serious than they thought. Nuer often neglect their duties to their various spirits. They omit or forget to sacrifice to them or they fail to dedicate cows to them or they use cows dedicated to them for marriage and find that they cannot replace them or do not trouble to do so. If a misfortune falls on them they then know that it is due to the anger of a spirit. Often, however, they are in doubt about the cause and confused and bewildered. It may be that the

776 suffering is just something, like death in old age, which had to
577 happen. It may be due to a fetish or the evil eye. It may be the
777 outcome of a curse or the anger of a ghost. Nevertheless, Nuer generally appear to feel that suffering is due to some fault of theirs, and it is probable that there is always an element of this feeling in every situation of misfortune, whatever its immediate cause may be thought to be.

IV

782 I have discussed in a preliminary way the conception Nuer have of God, the ideas and feelings they have about their relations with him, and some of the actions they think bring about divine intervention in human affairs. I take these topics up again in succeeding chapters after the notion of Spirit has been broadened by an account of other spiritual conceptions. A brief consideration of some of the commoner expressions used in Nuer prayers may, however, be given now because they are used only when speaking to God.

For obvious reasons Nuer prayers are most commonly heard on public and formal occasions, generally in connexion with sacrifices. At any important sacrifice, and sometimes on other important occasions also, Nuer make long invocations, called *lammi*, about the event which gave rise to the occasion, and into these long rambling addresses are every now and again introduced short prayers, mostly petitionary prayers. These what we may call stock prayers are often strung together in strophes in a kind of Pater Noster, such as 'Our father, it is thy universe, it is thy will, let us be at peace, let the souls of the people be cool, thou art our father, remove all evil from our path', and so forth. However, there are no set form and order to these prayers, and each petition may be used separately and anywhere and at any time, and not only in invocations but also in private and spontaneous prayer, whether spoken or inward, and as pious ejaculations. If he is in any trouble or anxiety, the head of a Nuer household may pace up and down his kraal brandishing his spear and uttering some of these supplications; or, less formally, he may say them standing or squatting with his eyes turned towards heaven and his arms outstretched from the elbows, moving his hands, palms uppermost, up and down. They may also be uttered, if he says anything

They may also be uttered, GOD if he says anything at all, in the petition a man on a journey makes to God as he knots 782
grasses together at the side of a path, a practice Nuer call *tuc*. A 777
man may do this because he has knocked his 'bad foot' against a stump in the path, for this presages misfortune, which can be avoided by asking God to let the badness remain in the grass so that the traveller may continue his journey with fortune. Each man has a 'good (auspicious) foot' and a 'bad (inauspicious) foot' and he learns which is which by experience. Nuer tie grass in the same manner to ensure success in any enterprise for which a journey is undertaken, often at the present day when they go to buy or beg something from an Arab merchant. They ask God to let them make a good bargain or that the merchant may make them a gift.[1] Nuer may also utter these phrases of prayer at any time as devout ejaculations, and not only when they are in trouble or desire a boon, for they have told me that they like to speak to God when they are happy (*loc tedh*) and because they are happy, and that they often say a few words to him as they go about their daily affairs.

I have already discussed the significance of some of these 782
prayerful words and expressions: 'our father', 'it is thy universe', 'it is thy will', and others. I will now consider the meaning of yet a few others, choosing for the purpose the commonest petitionary phrases. Before doing this I would draw attention to the fact that the petitioner generally uses the first person plural. In private ejaculations a Nuer may use such expressions as 'ah, my God', 'ah, God, what is this?', and 'let me journey well', but he will also use the plural pronoun, and in prayers and invocations uttered in public the plural is invariably used: 'let us be at peace', or whatever the expression may be.[2] I draw attention to this because it is not, I believe, just an indication that there are other people on whose behalf the speaker is asking God's favours. It is rather that the occasions on which prayers are publicly offered are generally

---

[1] Some Nuer have told me that this custom of knotting grasses originated among the Dinka. It is found among some, if not all, the Dinka tribes (R. T. Johnston, 'The Religious and Spiritual Beliefs of the Bor Dinka', *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1934, p. 126).

[2] There are two pronominal suffixes for the first person plural, *ko* and *ne*, [193]
which are respectively exclusive and inclusive. For example, '*bako ne*', 'we shall go', includes the speaker and others but not the person or persons spoken to, whereas '*bane ne*', 'we shall go', includes also the person or persons spoken to. [195]
In speaking to God Nuer have, of course, to use the exclusive form.

●782 such as emphasize by their gravity that, particularly in relation to God, all are members one of another. It is of course natural as well as noticeable that close kin stick together in danger and when a wrong has been done to any one of them, but Nuer also quite clearly show that they feel that a misfortune for any member of their community is a misfortune for all, that when one suffers all suffer, and that if each is to be at peace all must be at peace. This feeling of oneness is particularly evident in Nuer prayers, because they are asking to be delivered from suffering, which has a common quality, the more so in that it is suffering in general rather than particular misfortunes of which they speak.

782
576 Perhaps the commonest phrase in Nuer prayers, and the one with which they often start prayer, is '*akonienko*'. Literally this means 'let us sleep', but here it should be rendered 'let us be at peace'. The commonest of the Nuer greetings and, when others are said, the first to be spoken is '*ci nien?*' or '*ci nienu?*', literally, 'have you slept?' The saluted man replies to this, as to other greetings, by a grunt of affirmation. This is something of a joke among Europeans because Nuer have a reputation with them for being lethargic and lazy; but the question means something rather different from 'have you slept?' It means even more than our 'did you sleep well?' What Nuer understand by the question is rather, I think, 'have you rested?' or 'are you at ease?' The sense of 'ease' is reinforced by the question which generally follows: '*male?*' or '*maleu?*', which can be translated 'are you well?' but is better translated in the same general sense as the first question as 'are you at ease?' or 'are you at peace?'—not, however, so much with the meaning of not being at strife with others as with that of being at peace within. The word *mal* is also used in farewells: '*wer ke mal*', 'go in peace', and '*dudhni ke mal*', 'remain in peace'. It has in the Nuer tongue the sense of 'easy' or 'light', and in other Nilotic tongues it means 'heaven' or 'above' and in its verbal form 'to pray'—images which go with sleep which eases the mind.

576 That Nuer regard being at ease or at peace as having something to do with being in friendship with God is shown by a further question which may follow: '*ci pal?*' or '*ci palu?*', 'have you prayed?' I think that the idea implied here is that being at peace in yourself means being at peace with God as well as with your fellow men. A fourth question asked in greetings is '*ci tol?*', the sense of which is: does the smoke rise from your hearth, that is,

is everything well with your home? A fifth question sometimes 576
asked is '*ci bagh?*', 'has it dawned (well for you)?' Not all these questions are always asked, but often two or three of them are, and sometimes more. In the full greeting we therefore get a composite picture of easy sleep and fresh awakening, contentment, prayer, and a smoking hearth, that is, of a person at peace in himself.

This digression was made to explain the meaning of the expres- 782
sion '*akonienko*' in prayer. The phrase is in harmony with some 196
other expressions used in prayer: '*apwonyko pwol*', 'may we be light', and '*apwonyko koc*', 'may we be cool'. *Pwony* means 'body' or 'self' and here it means 'self' in the sense of the person as an entire person, body and soul. There is no reason why a Nuer should want to be light or cool in a purely physical sense. What is intended is to ask that the people may be light not only in the sense of physical well-being but also in the sense of *pwol loc*, of being light-hearted or joyful, free from burdens and troubles; and that they may be cool in the sense of not being anxious or worried, cool in the sense of calm. This is shown by a variant which is one of the commonest Nuer prayers, '*a yiegh neni koc*', which can in this context only be translated 'may the souls of the people be cool', though in other contexts *yiegh* can mean 'breath' or 'life'. Very often the word *thei* is added, '*a yiegh neni koce thei*', and this gives an emphasis: 'may the souls of the people be very cool'. Obviously Nuer are not asking, unless it be metaphorically, that their breath or life may be very cold. The word *koc* is also used in expressions of good will towards persons, especially in the blessing '*apwonydu koc*', 'may you be cool', that is, 'may you be at peace'.[1]

The word *koc* can also mean 'soft' or 'tender', and though it is best translated 'cool' in prayers the two meanings may blend. Here again, Nuer clearly do not want to be physically soft. Indeed the expression '*koce thei*' in the physical sense of softness means
when applied to men 'to be completely impotent sexually'. The 782
idea of softness is seen in the metaphor often heard in prayers 196
and invocations: 'may we tread on wild rice'. *Poon*, wild rice, is, 137
Nuer say, the softest of grasses to the feet, as it is also one of the

---

[1] The symbolism can at once be appreciated by ourselves, especially by those acquainted with the Vulgate and other Latin sacred texts where *refrigerium*, a cooling, is used in the tropical senses of 'consolation', 'mitigation', 'refreshing', and 'comfort'.

● 782
196
[137]

tenderest pasture grasses, being sometimes gathered to feed small calves by hand. Nuer speak of life as walking through pastures and they ask for a path that has no hidden dangers, that is, is free from evil, and for softness underfoot, that is, a mind at ease. Hence they petition also '*gwenyi ko kwel gwath me jalko ko*', 'make clear a way for us in the place where we journey', and '*gwenyi ko gwath*', 'clear for us a place'. Here again the sense is mainly allegorical. The words do not usually refer to any particular place or journey but to the journey through life, and the making clear of the way does not refer only, or even at all, to any particular dangers of travelling through the bush but to all the sufferings and evils which beset the life of man.

Peace and deliverance are the key-notes of these petitions. They are seen again in the phrase '*kwoth ngaci rum yieni, romni yieko*', 'God, thou (who) knowest how to support [or care for] souls, support [or care for] our souls'. The general sense of the prayer is that God should protect those who supplicate him as a parent protects his helpless infant. This desire for peace, deliverance, and protection is summed up in another common petition: '*akoteko*', 'let us be'. I am not certain whether the verb here is *tek*, to be alive, or, as I think it is, *te*, to be. There is in any case a considerable overlap in meaning between the two words, and in this context there would not be any great difference in meaning between the one and the other, for the sense is: let us go on living and as we are. Nuer are asking for life, but not just life in the sense of living but of living abundantly, free from the troubles and sufferings which make life, as we say, not worth living. That this is the right interpretation is further suggested by another expression frequently heard in prayer, '*akolapko*', which also has to be translated 'let us be', and here again signifies, and in a deeper moral sense, life in the mode and manner of leading it. The verb is *labe*. It expresses a continuous state and can, I think, only be used of persons. It indicates a particular quality of a person which is part of his nature as that person and is therefore unchangeable, as in the phrases '*labe kuaar*', 'he is a leopard-skin priest', '*laba Nac*', 'I am a Jinaca clansman', '*laba ran*', 'I am a Nuer' or 'I am a man', and *labbo cok*', 'we are (like) ants [in the sight of God]'.

It will have been observed that these expressions in Nuer prayers, as is the case among other peoples, are often repetitions, but rather in the form of parallelisms than of tautologies, for they

16: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1956
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

are variations of meaning within the same general meaning. Different images are used to express the same general idea, each stressing a different aspect of it.[1] 782 196

The distinctive and significant features of Nuer mystical and moral theology cannot be extracted from the short affirmations and petitions which constitute their prayers if these are considered entirely by themselves without Nuer comments on them and without some knowledge of their ritual and of their ideas and values in general, but once these have been delineated they are seen to be summed up concisely in the prayers. They are asking God for deliverance from evil, so that they may have peace, denoted by a variety of images with emotional and ideational relatedness—sleep, lightness, ease, coolness, softness, prayer, the domestic hearth, abundant life, and life as it should be according to the nature of the person. As I have explained, Nuer regard the ills they wish to be delivered from as due to faults and they think they can only be avoided by keeping in the right in their dealings with God and men. These two ideas, of being in the right and of deliverance from evil, are basic to their religious thought and they are also, of course, complementary. A fuller understanding of these cardinal concepts of Nuer religion can be obtained only by taking into account their attitudes towards other spirits associated with God, their conception of the soul and of sin, and their sacrificial rites. 782

---

[1] Archbishop R. C. Trench discusses this feature of prayer in his *Synonyms of the New Testament*, 1871, *passim*.

ciated with ostriches. I do not know where it is supposed to have 776x
originated. 77

One of the spirits that are best known throughout Nuerland is *wiu*, a spirit of war and associated with clan spear-names. It is particularly associated with the sacred spear *wiu* of the Gaatgankir clan, the dominant clan of the Jikany tribes. *Wiu* is also associated with thunder, '*ce wiu mar*' being equivalent to '*ce nhial mar*', 'it thundered (lightened)'. We may readily accept the Nuer statement that it was made known to them by the Gaatgankir clan, who are acknowledged by all to be of Dinka descent. That the *wiu* spear is of some age and that the Gaatgankir clan have long been indistinguishable from other Nuer in their general culture suggest, in view of Nuer statements that the spirits of the air fell recently, that the spear is older than the spirit, and this may be so, for in the story accounting for the spear there is no mention of the spirit.

A spirit of great interest is *buk*, also called *buk man deang*, *buk* 776x
the mother of (the air-spirit) *deng*, and *bungdit*, a Dinka title 782●
meaning *buk* the great. This female spirit, known throughout 177
Nuerland, is associated with rivers and streams. It is *kwoth yier*, a river-spirit. Dr. Lienhardt has recorded a song in which it is called 'daughter of fire-flies' and by its cow-name '*kwacwar*', 'leopard of the night', imagery bringing to mind fire-flies and consequently streams, near which they are particularly numerous. Nuer sometimes offer first-fruits of their millet and make libations to it in streams and in times of sickness they may sacrifice animals to it on the banks. They also throw beer and tobacco, and maybe a bound goat as well, into the water as offerings when they take their herds across rivers or engage in large-scale fishing, praying that they may be protected from injury by crocodiles, water-snakes, bones of fish, sharp shells, and lost fishing-spears. On such occasions they may also sing hymns to it, the best known of which I record later. *Buk* is said to have two daughters, also associated with streams, or with particular streams, *candit* and *nyaliep*. 'Daughters' is a figure of speech, for I was told that they were once Nuer maidens whom God took and put in the water, where they became spirits. *Candit* is said to have once been seized by a man of the Mitnyaal lineage of the Gaatgankir clan on a river bank and to have lived with him till she bore him a child, when she returned to the river. The spirit is therefore revered as the

×776 guardian spirit of this lineage. They dedicate cows and sheep to
●782 it and pour libations of their milk for it into rivers. Since *buk* is in
rivers and streams it belongs to the below and I discuss it further
177 in connexion with the tellurian spirits, but as the mother of *deng*
it also belongs to the above, though it does not possess men as other spirits of the above do. Nuer explain its being both above and below by saying that as Spirit (*kwoth*) it is in the sky but materially (*pwonyde*) it is in rivers and streams. That *buk* is of Dinka origin is clear both from its being the mother of *deng* and from its Dinka title *bungdit*.[1]

×776 There are other spirits of the air, though I know little about
them. I have heard of one called *mar*, probably the same word as
177 that meaning 'to thunder'. Miss Huffman mentions a *cul*, sender
of dreams.[2] Father Crazzolara, speaking presumably of the Leek tribe, whose territory, where the Catholic mission is situated, is near the Shilluk kingdom, says that the Nuer have taken over the Shilluk spirit *nyikang*.[3] There are probably others.

×776 Father Crazzolara, though he contrasts fetish spirits and nature sprites with spirits like *nai*, *dayim*, *nyikang*, and *deng*, labels them all *Erdgeister*.[4] In my opinion, on the contrary, these spirits are undoubtedly classed by Nuer in the category of the above, though some are, I concede, regarded as inferior to others, for example *nai* and *dayim*, whom Nuer speak of as *gaat gaat kwoth*, children of the children of God, rather than as *gaat kwoth*, children of God, a usage which indicates that they are more distant from God and belong to the lowest rank of the heavenly beings. That my account is here at variance with that of Father Crazzolara may be due to the fact that the spirits of the air have only the vaguest personalities and lack distinct individualities defined by clear differentiation of attributes, so that Nuer have nothing very definite to say about them. The figures are all more or less alike, and their celestial and other associations are not so much indications of function as a means of differentiation. For the Nuer themselves one spirit of the air is distinct from another really only because it has a different name. For this reason I have written 'it'

---

[1] It is probably common to all the Dinka sections. Further evidence of its Dinka origin is the fact, which I have learnt from Dr. Lienhardt, that *buk* or *bung* denotes in Dinka black and white markings, like those of the pied crow with which the Nuer *buk* is also associated (p. 81).

[2] Ray Huffman, *Nuer-English Dictionary*, 1929, p. 10.

[3] Op. cit., p. 136.

[4] Ibid., pp. 133 seq.

It was this spirit, a particularly dangerous one, that was troub- 776 ×
ling Galuak. Nuer use the word *kap*, to take hold of or to lay hold 791
on, to describe the possession of a man by a spirit. It was known 753
that it was *nai* who was responsible because when the year before 782
Galuak had a similar sickness a prophet of *nai* had divined that he was possessed by this spirit. On that occasion his family had sacrificed goats, but during the past year no sacrifice had been made or ceremony held in the spirit's honour, an omission of which Galuak's family now felt very conscious. In the circumstances a return of the spirit to Galuak might have been expected.

The same prophet had been sent for from a neighbouring village and was expected to arrive before evening. In the meanwhile Galuak's kinsmen sought high and low for a beast to sacrifice right away to *nai*. All animals in the village suitable for sacrifice had recently been killed in other ceremonies (p. 59) and the kinsmen were unable to bring back even a goat for their pains. I was told that *nai* would not, however, kill Galuak in the meantime because it would see that they were trying to find an animal. The prophet arrived, as was expected, in the evening and he was accompanied by two friends. No doubt the matter was discussed in the byre that night, but no action was taken till the following morning.

In the morning, after a talk in the byre, the persons concerned 776 ×
went across to the hut of Galuak's mother, Nyadang, and I was 791
invited to accompany them as a friend of the family. Nhial, 755
Galuak's brother, was working for me. Here the prophet was presented with five piastres—on his visit the year before he had been given a war-spear and a fish-spear. He sat with his back to the wall of the hut, and Galuak and his father, Rainen, sat on a mat facing him and with their backs to the door, which was closely drawn against the entrance to the hut. The windows had been blocked with grass so that the hut was illumined only by faint shafts of light which penetrated round the edges of the door. Even this dim light could not be seen by Galuak and his father, for skins had been placed over their heads so that they might be in total darkness. Altogether there were, besides Galuak and his father, thirteen persons in the hut, sitting with their backs to the wall. The atmosphere was stifling.

The seance began by the prophet shaking his rattle and singing. Karlual, one of Galuak's maternal uncles, also shook a rattle on one side of the prophet and one of the two friends who had

× 776 they wanted to be sure that when *nai* and the other spirit had
791 been satisfied there would be nothing further to prevent a speedy
755 recovery. As for Rainen, if his manner of speech was that of a man out of his senses, its content showed reflection and purpose. What he, or the spirit in him, said was aimed at compelling Nhial to hand over his wages for the purchase from government herds of beasts for sacrifices, an object Rainen had been vainly trying to attain for some days previous to the ceremony. Rainen also justified himself, in what the spirit said, for the slaughter of a number of beasts to appease his various spirits, for which his family had criticized him for extravagance. They felt that too much of the family property was being devoted to religious purposes, whereas the spirit made it clear that, far from having made too many sacrifices, he had not made enough. Had he made more, Galuak would not have fallen sick. Religious and personal issues were interwoven in the spirit's declarations.

× 776 When the spirit had ceased speaking we left the hut, and
791 Galuak's paternal uncle, Dol, went to chop down a branch of the
● 782 'wild date' (*Balanites aegyptiaca*), a tree to which *nai* is said to be
very partial, to erect it as a shrine (*riek*) to the spirit near the hut.
778 When it had been erected a clump of *tuat* grass was dug up by the roots and planted at the side of the branch in a hole first filled with water, it being the dry season. A he-goat—by this time one had been procured—was then brought out and the prophet waved his spear, decorated with ostrich plumes, over its back and made a short invocation, telling the spirit that they were honouring it, saying that it would now cease to trouble Galuak, and asking God that the people might rest in peace. He then cut the goat's throat. It was later eaten by himself and his two friends. The people of the homestead did not partake of its flesh, but when it had been cooked some children were called from a nearby homestead and given pieces of the meat and told to run back to their home with them. The Nuer said of this: '*ca gat kwoth nang cieng*', 'the son of God is taken home'. Finally a *buor*, a mud mound in the shape of an ordinary kitchen windscreen, was erected near the shrine. On the following evening Rainen rubbed ashes on the back of a cow of his herd and dedicated it to the spirit of his father. By so doing he felt that he had appeased the second spirit which was troubling his son.

× 776
782 The relations between Nuer and their spirits centre in these

dedicated cattle, and much of the trouble the spirits cause them 776
is occasioned by failure to devote animals to the spirits or by some 782
fault concerning these beasts. When a spirit is by descent attached, or of its own accord attaches itself, to a family they should devote to it a cow or an ox, generally a cow; and they sometimes, especially at eventide, rub ashes along its back, an act which is in itself a kind of recognition of the spirit, and they may also pour a little milk or beer over the peg to which it is tethered. I do not think that there is any Nuer herd which has not at least one animal dedicated to one or other spirit of the above or of the below, and often there are several, for many families have several spirits and dedicate an animal to each of them. A dedicated beast is often to be identified by metal rings attached to its leather collar. These are ornaments devoted to the spirit and not phylacteries. When a daughter of the family marries, the *kwoth* of one or other parent is given a cow of her bridewealth, being treated in this matter as though it were a kinsman with rights in their daughter. Sometimes the *kuth* of both parents receive cattle at the same marriage, but if a spirit does not get a cow on the marriage of one daughter it will get one on the marriage of one of her sisters.

When a spirit gets a cow, whether it be dedicated to it at a marriage or in its honour on some other occasion, the cow ought not to be disposed of, and should it die it ought to be replaced. However, Nuer seem to feel that as long as the spirit has one cow in the herd it will not be angry if a second cow is disposed of. Thus if the spirit gets a cow of a daughter's bridewealth, they feel that there is not the same need to keep the cow previously dedicated to it. Nevertheless, there is always a risk in disposing of any dedicated animal. The male calves of a dedicated cow, or at any rate one of them, may eventually be offered to the spirit in sacrifice. However, it seems to be held that the human owner may dispose of the calves of a spirit's cow for marriage if he explains his purpose to the spirit. If a dedicated cow is driven off with other cattle by persons seeking redress for some injury it will not be kept in the byre of its captors when they realize its character but will either be returned to its owner or will be loosened to wander, lest misfortune should fall on them. When I bought from the Government some cattle which had been taken from Nuer in fines it was pointed out to me by Nuer friends that one of the cows

776 782 was a *yang kwoth*, the cow of a spirit, and that no good would come of my possessing it. They were not surprised when one night it tore up its tethering-peg and fell into the Sobat river and was drowned. The *Sudan Intelligence Report* of September–October 1934, No. 69, records the interesting case of a man who was ordered by a Government Chiefs' Court to pay a cow in damages to another Nuer. As at the time he possessed only one cow and this was dedicated to a spirit, the Court permitted him to defer payment while he went to obtain a cow owing to him in a different part of the country. During his absence from home on [761] this errand one of the Government chiefs took his cow. The owner was killed by an elephant on his journey and his kinsmen claimed compensation from the chief because they attributed his death to the removal of the cow devoted to his spirit. The milk of a spirit's [262] cow should only be drunk by members of the family. It belongs to the spirit and is therefore reserved for the people to whom it is attached. I was first made aware of this rule when on a journey I fell sick in a Nuer village and was compelled to spend a few days there. Being unable to eat solid food, I asked a lad of the nearest homestead if I might have a little milk. He said that he was sorry, but the only cow giving milk in his family herd was the cow of his mother's spirit, and he could not let me have its milk without her permission. He later brought some milk and told me that it would be all right for me to drink it as I was sick, but when I could eat again only the children of the home might either milk the cow or drink its milk.

Should a man neglect to dedicate a cow to his spirit when he is in a position to do so, or should he dispose of a beast already devoted to the spirit and not dedicate another to it, sickness is [753] likely to fall on his family or herd. But although Nuer say this, and believe what they say, it is not uncommon for them to use a spirit's cow for bridewealth or some other purpose, hoping that they will soon be able to replace it. They know that they are doing wrong but they think that maybe the spirit, having been informed of their intentions, will understand their difficulty and will excuse their manner of overcoming it, knowing that they mean to keep their promise to give it another cow as soon as they can. But they may not find it easy to procure another cow for some time and the spirit has in the meantime to go without one; or they keep on putting off the replacement because they want to use

16: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1956
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

their cattle for other purposes, and also because they say to themselves that as no evil has befallen them since they disposed of the spirit's cow it does not matter; or they are just careless and forgetful. I have known of several cases of men using the cattle of spirits as bridewealth. Then a child of the family died, and then maybe a second child, or some other misfortunes happened to them, and they began to be sorry that they were so casual and summoned a prophet or diviner to confirm that their sufferings were due to the anger of a spirit about the loss of its cow. In one case I heard discussed the spirit *deng* was not appeased even when a new cow was dedicated to it in the place of its cow given as bridewealth, but continued to make trouble for the family. Efforts were therefore made to get back the original cow. Unfortunately the man who had received it in the allocation of the bridewealth, the natural father of the bride, had in the meanwhile dedicated it to his own spirit, and he was making difficulties about its return. He did not see why the consequences of a transgression should be passed to him. In another case which I had the opportunity to follow, a man had given a cow as his contribution to the bridewealth paid on the marriage of his sister's son. This cow calved a female calf in the home of one of the bride's mother's brothers, and then it died there. As the marriage had not been completed, the calf was regarded as having taken the place of its dam. A difficulty then arose. The cow had been the donor's spirit's cow and ought never to have left his herd, and subsequent misfortunes in his family were attributed to his having given it away. He therefore pressed for the calf to be handed over to him so that he could give it to his spirit in the place of the beast it had lost. The bride's maternal uncle was not inclined to be helpful, and negotiations had not been concluded by the time I left Nuerland. Had it been the bride's own family who had received the cow they would, for their daughter's sake, have let the man have the calf without argument, on the understanding that he would one day let them have a similar animal in its stead. Thus I have known a family who had recently disposed of all their cattle in making a marriage to ask for, and receive, the return of an ox of the bridewealth from the family of the bride when one of them fell sick, so that they might dedicate it to God, to whom it would one day be sacrificed.[1]

776 ×
782 ●

---

[1] Cows are not dedicated to God, only to spirits. Oxen are occasionally dedicated to God but, in my experience, only on such an occasion as this, when the

x 776 ●782 231 426 To appreciate how Nuer get into such difficulties with their dedicated cattle as I have mentioned we must bear in mind the overwhelming importance of cattle in their lives, that cattle are generally the issue in disputes, and that almost every Nuer owes cattle and has cattle owing to him, debts which are often not settled, if at all, for years and sometimes even for generations. Nuer will go to almost any lengths to obtain cattle to which they think they have a right and to put off the settlement of their own debts. It is not surprising that in these circumstances a man may postpone fulfilling his obligation to a spirit if it is a question of having to choose between the claims of an importunate creditor and of a spirit which, it is hoped, will be satisfied for the time being with the man's good intention; or that to fulfil an unavoidable obligation to a kinsman a man may take a liberty with a spirit which, he hopes, will not take offence at a fault in such compelling circumstances.

x 776 782 Besides dedicating a cow to his spirit and sacrificing an ox, sheep, or goat to it when it is displeased, a Nuer ought now and again to hold a ceremony in its honour. This generally takes place after the harvest has been gathered in and there is plenty of beer. I attended one of these ceremonies in the home of Karlual, who figured in the story of Galuak's sickness which I have just related. It was held in honour of *deng*, who is what the Nuer call *kwoth ciengde* or *kwoth goale*, the spirit of his home or of his family. I was told that each of Karlual's numerous brothers holds a like ceremony in turn till it is his turn to hold it again. The ceremony of the year before had been on a large scale and an ox had been sacrificed at it. *Deng* had afterwards told Karlual through the mouth of someone who had become possessed by it that all it wanted this year was some beer, so the ceremony I witnessed was on a smaller scale. It is known as 'the bathing of the cow in beer'.

The ceremony was held in the morning and was very late in starting because those who attended it, or some of them, had first attended a ceremony of the same kind elsewhere in the village, that held by a man called Mokwac for the spirit of his concubine's dead husband. When I arrived at Karlual's homestead I found that a gourdful of beer had been placed at the side of a clump of grass at the edge of the kraal. Karlual's brothers and their families

---

intention is to sacrifice it in the near future, the dedication being in the nature of a consecration for sacrifice.

and a number of kinsmen and neighbours were present, one of 776x
whom, Dhoal, was asked to preside because he was a leading man 782
in the community. He began by pouring some of the beer out of the gourd over the tethering-peg of the cow devoted to *deng* when Karlual shouted to him to wait till they brought him a ladle. When it was brought, he poured a libation with it over the peg. A small son of Karlual was then told to do the same and afterwards to drink what was left in the ladle. Then various kinsmen also poured libations over the peg and all present poured beer into their hands and threw it into the air, an act called *kith*. The people then sat around the gourd and drank the remainder of the beer while they discussed family affairs. 613

All kinsmen who can do so should attend a ceremony of this 612
kind, especially close agnatic kinsmen, for this is an occasion 776x
when kin are expected to reveal any resentment they may have in 782
their hearts towards one another. Each tells the others where they have been at fault (*duer*) in speech or act during the past year, and the issues raised are then settled peacably by discussion. A man must not keep a grievance hidden, and if he does not reveal it now he must for ever keep silence. Nuer say that all the evil in their hearts is then blown away. I think that this is the meaning of the throwing of beer into the air. They also say '*giakni dial ba ke bap e yang*', 'all evils (which they have done to one another) will be gathered to (or taken over by) the cow'. All present place ashes on the back of the beast, probably an ox, and it is then cleansed by sprinkling or blowing beer on it. However, I did not see this part of the ceremony because owing to the lateness in starting it the beast had gone to pasture with the rest of the herd. I was told that it was performed in the afternoon when the herd returned from grazing.

III

In what I have said so far about the spirits of the air I have been 776x
speaking of their relations to ordinary Nuer. Sometimes a spirit 791
possesses a man and when he has recovered from the seizure abides with him, giving him powers of healing, divination, exorcism, and foresight. I discuss the functions of these prophets in Chapter XII. Here I give only such information about them as is necessary for an appreciation of the spirits which possess them.

regularly have cows dedicated to them and they have their shrines and drums. 776x

Also, the Nuer attitude towards them is different from their attitude to God, who, though he punishes men, is their father and friend. The spirits of the air are not so benevolent, and they are more immediately exacting. To the European observer they seem to be greedy, capricious, and hostile, but this is not quite how they appear to the Nuer, for though they demand that animals be devoted to them and animal oblations made, and bring misfortunes on those who neglect these duties, and though, as the hymns to them show, they delight in blood and battle and bring sickness and death, yet they only cause misfortunes to those who in one way or another are at fault. They give victory in war, and they favour those persons and families to whom they attach themselves, but they are jealous spirits who demand tribute from their votaries. The Nuer fear them but they do not feel so much resentful as guilty when they bring sickness on them. They recognize that an angry spirit generally has right on its side, and they seek to make amends so that it will cease to trouble them; and in making amends through sacrifice a bargain is struck in a much cruder and more human way than when a sacrifice is made to God. No Nuer would try to bargain with God as he bargains with a spirit, trying to buy it off as cheaply as he can, and no Nuer would use such familiar terms in addressing God as he sometimes uses in addressing spirits of the air. One reason for this difference is perhaps not far to seek: the spirits of the air are 'owned' by persons and they make their wishes known through men, through prophets who may be ambitious and greedy, and through mediums whose revelations may be coloured by their own interests.

Yet, though one may say all this, the spirits of the air are, nevertheless, being Spirit, also God. They are many but also one. God is manifested in, and in a sense is, each of them. I received the impression that in sacrificing or in singing hymns to an air-spirit Nuer do not think that they are communicating with the spirit and not with God. They are, if I have understood the matter correctly, addressing God in a particular spiritual figure or manifestation. They speak to God directly or they speak to God in, for example, the figure of *deng*, whichever mode is most appropriate in the circumstances. They do not see a contradiction here, and 776x 782●

× 776 there is no reason why they should see one. God is not a particular
● 782 air-spirit but the spirit is a figure of God. So while in a sacrifice one can say that the oblation is made to *deng* and not to *wiu*, *mani*, or any other spirit of the air, one cannot say that it is not made to God. The spirits are not each other but they are all God in different figures. Consequently, if one asks a Nuer whether a sacrifice is to God or to a spirit of the air the question makes no sense to him. Nuer pass without difficulty or hesitation from a more general and comprehensive way of conceiving of God or Spirit to a more particular and limited way of conceiving of God or Spirit and back again. This is often very apparent in invocations made at their sacrifices and in what they say in times of sickness and other troubles. Therefore a queston which tries to present a disjunction, an either . . . or, in answer to which either one proposition or the other may be accepted but not both, is not understood.

× 776 It is in the nature of the conception of Spirit that it can be thought of in this sort of way, that what is distributed in a number of beings is, though different, yet the same and, though divided, yet a whole. Therefore, what has been said in this respect about the conception of God in relation to the conception of spirits of the air can also be said of the spirits of the air themselves. *Deng* has several forms but they are all the same *deng*, and *deng* may be in a number of different prophets at the same time, each of whom is *deng*, without *deng* being in any way divided.

V

× 776 Another sort of spirits which are regarded as spirits of the above
769 in contrast to those of the below are the *colwic*, spirits which were once persons. These persons were struck by lightning or, more rarely, disappeared in a whirlwind; and some Nuer included also persons found dead in the bush without the cause of death being apparent. They are conceived as having been, as we would say, metamorphosed. The human has been changed into the divine. *Tic*, soul, has become *kwoth*, spirit. Nuer think of these persons as having been 'taken by God into the sky' and they say that there are multitudes of such spirits in the sky. Their names are for the most part forgotten in course of time but a few become tutelary spirits of lineages and are for that reason remembered. Such a

kwoth goal, spirit of a lineage, is called on for aid, especially, I 776x
was told, by a man seeking refuge from enemies pursuing him. 769
Most lineages seem to have at least one *colwic* patron spirit, to which cows are dedicated and their bull calves sacrificed. In their role of patrons of lineages they are similar to the totemic spirits, which I discuss in the following chapter, but they are treated in the present place, and not with the totemic spirits, partly because in other respects they obviously lack what are usually regarded as totemic characteristics, but chiefly because they are spoken about by Nuer as spirits of the above whereas totemic spirits are spirits of the below.

Although each *colwic* spirit, so long as it is remembered, retains its individuality in relation to its family and lineage, all of them are also conceived of as merged in God or in his hypostasis of *col*, the air-spirit of lightning. I have heard it said that *col* is black-haired and that this is the reason for calling a person killed by lightning a *colwic*. This suggestion, which is not entirely satisfactory grammatically, may have been put forward by the Nuer I was conversing with as a piece of *ad hoc* etymology deemed adequate to satisfy my curiosity,[1] but whether this is so or not, the first part of the word, *col*, means 'dark', and the spirit to which the word also refers is a spirit of storms; so in the word *colwic* there is an association of some kind with darkness and the suggestion made to me shows that Nuer are conscious of this.

Many people are killed by lightning, as memorials erected in 776x
their honour in villages bear witness, and it is therefore not sur- 821
prising that Nuer are anxious when violent storms break over 782
their homes and the sky is pierced by flashes of lightning. Then there is silence in the byres and one may see old men throw pieces of tobacco from the doorways into the storm, uttering a simple prayer, such as 'ah God, father, take this tobacco [or they may say "ox"]. I have paid thee ransom (*kok*) father [with this offering].

---

[1] Miss Soule informed Professor and Mrs. Seligman (op. cit., p. 238) that the expression is *colwec*, '*col* of the village community'. Father Crazzolara (op. cit., pp. 97–98) writes *colwic*, gen. *colwec*, but he does not give a literal translation of the expression. In my opinion the second syllable of the word is *wic*, gen. *wec*, 'head', and not *wec*, gen. *wic*, 'cattle-camp' or 'community'. Dr. Mary Smith tells me that she has heard Nuer speak of *coldoor* in reference to a person killed by lightning in the bush (*door*), though *colwic* is also used. On the other hand, some Nuer told her that people killed by lightning are called *colwic* because they do not have their heads shaved after death, as other people do. Clearly the syllables which compose the word have no definite meaning for Nuer.

× 776 Come to earth gently, do not come with fury to thy grass [the
821 thatched roof]. Come gently to thy grass. No one disputes with
• 782 thee. It is thy universe. It is thy will, thine alone.' Or a man may
take a mallet, used for driving tethering-pegs into the ground, lay
it in the doorway to his byre, and, after asking God to 'rain well'
for it is his universe, throw some ashes into the air in offering.
Once when after a heavy storm I told a Nuer that should there be
another storm of like severity I would desert my tent and take
shelter in his byre he rebuked me, saying 'God does not wish the
thunder to come like that again. You should not suggest it.'

× 776 When a person is killed by lightning Nuer are resigned. They
761 say that God has struck him with his fire and that as God has
766 taken him there is nothing to be said. God has taken the soul of
the man to himself and 'he would be angry if he saw you grieving
for the person whom he has taken'. The death is not a punishment
for some fault but a mysterious act of divine will, almost what
some theologians call an election. All death is ultimately attributed
to God, but only in the sense of his being the first and
necessary cause which operates through secondary and contingent
causes. In the case of a *colwic*, however, God has chosen a particular
person for himself and taken him with his own hand. Nuer
say that the chosen person has entered into kinship, or friendship,
× 776 with God.[1] For this reason a person struck by lightning does not
766 receive an ordinary burial and the usual mortuary rites are not
held for him. I was under the impression, and have elsewhere
stated, that, nevertheless, the formal rules of mourning were
observed, but Dr. Mary Smith tells me that this is not so, and
what she says is more in accordance with what I have recorded
above.[2]

A person is usually struck in his byre or hut and the walls of the burnt-out building are broken down over the body, and the

---

[1] In a published note on *colwic* (*Man*, 1949) I have translated a phrase, '*ca mar e kwoth*' by 'he has been brought into kinship with God'. As written it could mean this, but I now think that I may not have heard the words correctly and that what was said should be translated 'he was struck by God (with lightning)'. However, the idea of kinship, or friendship, with God was also expressed where the context allowed no room for misunderstanding.

[2] We find the same idea among the Shilluk. They do not bury or mourn a person killed by lightning. The death is an honour and the family feel that they have made an offering and will therefore prosper (the Rev. D. S. Oyler, 'Shilluk Notes', *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1926, pp. 58–59). Dr. Lienhardt tells me that the Dinka also do not mourn a person killed by lightning.

charred remains of the rafters, supports, and thatch are heaped 776x
on top of them. If a man is struck in the bush his body is covered 766
with grass and thornwood. Nuer say that it is only the *ring*, the
flesh, which they cover up. The *yiegh*, the life, or in this sense the
soul, has been taken by God and has become part of him. Sacrifices 776x
must be made at once. The people sacrifice to God even if a byre 782
or hut is struck without causing death because the misfortune,
being a direct intervention of God in human affairs, is a danger
which must be got rid of. They say '*ba luak kier ka del*', 'the byre
is expiated with one of the flock'.[1] If a person is killed, his kith
and kin feel that they are in grave danger and anyone closely connected
with the dead makes sacrifice as soon as he hears of the
calamity. The dead man's paternal and maternal kin and his
affines bring oxen and sheep and goats to the mortuary mound
and sacrifice them there. Even distant kinsmen and unrelated
friends and neighbours make sacrifice; and if a girl is killed by
lightning her sweetheart will sacrifice an animal. The whole community
is involved, and fellow villagers who do not feel that they
are sufficiently connected with the dead for animal sacrifice to be
necessary throw leaves of the tobacco plant on the mound in
silence. It is believed that unless sacrifices are made at once the
colwic may return bringing death to man and beast. Also, the 776x
close kinsmen of the dead are so unclean that relatives and neighbours
may not eat or drink in their homes before they have sacrificed; 782
animals must follow the dead before the people can rest in 783
peace. Nuer say '*ca je kir ka det kene rueth*', 'he (the dead man) was
expiated with some of the flock (goats and sheep) and oxen'. The
sacrifices cleanse the kith and kin and ward off from them further
misfortune.[2]

But only immediate danger is warded off by these sacrifices. 776x
The kin are not yet free from the ordinary contamination of 783
death and they will not be till another ceremony has been performed 766
some weeks or months later. This ceremony resembles the
usual *cuol woc* mortuary ceremony held for a person who has died
in some other way than by lightning and which I describe later,
but Nuer do not call it by that name. Indeed they say, as I have

---

[1] *Del* means both 'sheep' and 'goat'.

[2] Dr. R. G. Lienhardt tells me that an ox must be sacrificed on the evening after the death, just before sunset, and that its flesh must be consumed during the night, a rule which obtains for sacrifice only on this occasion. This is perhaps a further association of *colwic* with darkness.

be its patron. I have noted that when a widow is killed by lightning 776 ×
at the home of a man with whom she cohabited after her 766
husband's death her memorial is erected at her husband's home,
though his people invite her lover to attend the commemoration
ceremony.

Lat, son of Pan, the master of ceremonies (pp. 287–9) of 776 ×
Nyakewa's father's family, made fire ritually with firesticks and 766
from it were lighted the various fires on which pots were placed 782
for boiling the beer. The mud supports for the pots were made on
the spot, for one does not use old utensils on these occasions. Since
the ceremony was for a woman a new mud windscreen was constructed.
The master of ceremonies then erected a *riek*, a shrine- [778]
stake, in the centre of the funeral mound and planted at the side
of the mound a sapling of the *nyuot* tree. Such a mound and stake
are shown in Mr. Corfield's photograph in Plate II.[1] The *nyuot*
tree is, as we have noted, associated with the spirit *col* and also
with rain and with the sky from which rain and lightning come
and to which the soul of the dead person has gone. When planted
in the rains the sapling generally takes root. If it dies they plant
another. Many of the trees one sees in Nuer villages have been
planted in this manner.

Shortly before sunset a procession of about twenty men arrived bearing in their hands leaves of the tobacco plant and heads of millet. They threw down these offerings near the mound with the freshly erected shrine-stake in the centre of it. No one comes to the place of sacrifice empty-handed. The procession was headed by the master of ceremonies leading a black ox, *a thak ma col*. It should preferably be a black one. This *ma col* sacrificial victim, *col* the spirit of lightning, and the *colwic* make a harmony of darkness (*col*), the darkness of storm. Before the ox was sacrificed men came from all directions leading oxen and castrated he-goats and wethers. The father of the dead girl's husband brought an ox, as did one of her maternal uncles. Among those who brought he-goats and wethers were the girl's mother, one of her maternal aunts, one of her maternal uncles, several of her father's kinsmen, and the man who had begotten her brother in adulterous congress

---

[1] This is almost certainly a *colwic* shrine, but it is more elaborate than most and the offerings of tobacco seen at the base would not be seen at shrines in other parts of Nuerland. The photograph was taken among the eastern Jikany Nuer who border the Anuak, great cultivators of tobacco.

×776 with her mother, for her brother had also been begotten in adul-
766 tery, though by a different man from the man who begat her. The
●782 black ox was speared near the funeral mound and the other oxen and the sheep and goats were speared immediately afterwards. I have not known sheep and goats to be speared in any other sacrifices. The usual mode of sacrifice for them is by cutting the throat. Dr. Mary Smith tells me that they are speared on this occasion to symbolize the instantaneous death of a *colwic* by lightning. As soon as a goat or sheep fell it was cut in half through the belly. The oxen were also cut up unskinned, for one does not use the hides of animals sacrificed for a *colwic*, as one uses those of most sacrificial beasts, for sleeping on or for women's skirts. The head, hooves, some of the entrails, and part of the skin of the black ox were placed at the foot of the stake or hung on it. The chyme of the animals was collected and placed at the foot of the stake, and their tethering-cords were hung on it. Most of the flesh of the black ox went to the girl's father's lineage, on whose behalf it was sacrificed, but some went to collateral lineages, some to women of the father's lineage married to men of other lineages, and some to the girl's maternal uncles. I did not inquire how the other animals were divided but it may, I think, be assumed that in each case the animal was mostly consumed by the paternal kinsmen of the man who brought it to the sacrifice.

At dawn on the following morning the dead girl's senior maternal uncle sacrificed a bull on behalf of the maternal kinsfolk. It was first castrated in his byre because animals are not sacrificed entire. The uncle made a short invocation before spearing it. The meat of this animal was divided between the dead girl's own family, her maternal uncles, and various other relatives on the mother's side who were present. A man representing the mother then sacrificed an ox at the mound on behalf of the family. However the flesh of these sacrificed oxen may be divided according to rights of kinship, all present must receive pieces of meat, even though they be unrelated persons, because all must taste the meats of sacrifice to show the *colwic* that they do not reject or disregard (*cany*) it. The last sacrifice I witnessed was of a goat by a brother of the husband of the dead girl's mother's sister, on behalf of this maternal aunt; but I was told that more sheep and goats were slaughtered on subsequent days and that in all more than twenty animals were sacrificed. These were in addition to x776 766 •782 those which had been killed immediately after Nyakewa had been struck by lightning. As the husband of one of Nyakewa's maternal aunts was killed at the same moment as herself while he was on a visit to her village many animals of the village had also to be sacrificed on his behalf in his own village. The flocks of the village were so depleted that there was no suitable beast available for sacrifice in a case of serious sickness which occurred in the village shortly afterwards (p. 35). The number of beasts sacrificed is an indication both of the seriousness of the event which occasioned the ceremony and of the wide circle of persons it affected.

When the sun was high in the heavens on this second day of the ceremony the beer was drunk, though it had not properly fermented. The old men poured some on the sacred stake while uttering a few words. I heard one of the maternal uncles say 'Nyakewa, we have no kinship with God. Thou hast kinship with him now. See, thy mother remains here; do not let the spirits trouble her.' Towards the end of the beer-drinking the people sang hymns to spirits of the air to the accompaniment of hand-clapping.

Later the waste products of the beer were heaped around the base of the stake on top of the tobacco leaves and millet heads and parts of the sacrificed beasts. The dead girl's ox-tassels, her horn spoon, her butter-gourd, and two lumps of tobacco were [778] tied to the stake. These things were said to belong to God, for the girl's soul was now with God. They had become holy and could not be used by man. Finally the cooking stones and pots used in the beer-making were neatly arranged around the heap of offerings. I was told afterwards: 'Nyakewa has altogether departed from us who are men and has become Spirit (*kwoth*). Henceforward we will invoke her name in battle as we brandish our spears.' About a year after this ceremony kinsmen gather again at the shrine to drink beer and to sprinkle (*kith*) some of it into the air as an offering.

x776 753 778 Sometimes a *colwic* spirit seizes a member of its family or lineage, in the same way as a spirit of the air may seize a man, and makes him sick. When he recovers he makes a small mound-shrine (*yik*) in his homestead and this then takes the place of the original shrine at the home of the person killed by lightning. Some of the dead person's ornaments may be inserted into the mound of the new shrine and others hung on the stake erected in it and on the low fence enclosing it.

x 776 the word to denote a relationship between a social group and a natural species or a class of objects and 'totemistic' when the relationship tends to concern individuals rather than social groups. The distinction is not, however, a vital one and need not therefore be rigorously maintained; and such being the case, the word 'totem' may serve to denote the species or class in both instances. The same species, that is to say, may be the totem of a lineage (a totemic relationship) or of individuals (a totemistic relationship). I use the expressions 'totemic spirit' and 'totemistic spirit', as the case may be, to designate the *kwoth* of the species or class which is totem to a group or individual. Nuer distinguish between the spirit and the creature in which it may be said in some sense to make its appearance, for example, between the lion-spirit and the lion. It is to the spirit and not to the creature that Nuer devote cattle of the bridewealth of their daughters and to which they make sacrifice. Before discussing this problem further I give some examples of relationships between lineages and the natural species they are said to respect and from which they sometimes take their spear-names and honorific titles.

x 776 613 [773] ● 782 Some lineages respect lions. One of them, the *Leng* lineage of the Jinaca clan, say that the lion is their totem because their ancestor Gilgil was born twin to a lion. When they sacrifice to the lion-spirit, they are said to take a leg of the victim into the bush and leave it there, calling on the lions to come and eat their share, which I have heard described as the share of the *jibuthni*, the people of a collateral lineage (p. 287). I fancy that what is meant is that a token piece of meat is thrown into the bush and that it is spoken about as a leg. It is said that if a man who has the lion for totem injures a lion he may beget a son with nails like claws. I was told of a man that he took a spear belonging to a member of the Leng lineage, a neighbour of his, and killed a lion with it, and that shortly afterwards another lion killed a number of beasts of the Leng man's herd. It was proposed that the people should go out to hunt the animal, but after discussion it was decided that it would not be just to do so because the lion had right (*cuong*) on its side. Instead, the man who had killed the first lion with the spear of its totemic kinsman compensated him for the loss of his cattle and a sacrifice was made to the lion-spirit. After compensation and atonement had been made the second lion gave no more trouble. My friend Cam of the village of Yakwac

on the Sobat river was born of a woman of the Leng lineage and 776x
has, moreover, married a wife to the name of his maternal uncle 613
and begotten children to him by her; so, though he is not himself 782
a man of the Leng lineage, he has intimate ties with it, and he lives with its members. His brother told me how one day Cam killed a lion which he believed to be killing his cattle, for, his brother commented, 'Cam has no sense at all'. He returned [828]
from his successful hunt bending his fingers like claws and crouching as though he intended to spring on the people around him. A sheep was at once sacrificed to the lion-spirit, and Cam composed himself. While I was living in a cattle camp at the same village of Yakwac, which is occupied by part of the Leng lineage in the dry season, a girl of the lineage was taken hold of by the lion-spirit and had hysterics. Her family sacrificed a sheep to the spirit and dedicated a cow to it, for the seizure was thought to have been due to their failure to dedicate a cow to it earlier; and the girl was restored to her normal self. The Thiang lineage of Kurmayom village, also in Lou country, are another lineage whose totem is the lion, and they told me that they would not kill lions unless the lions first killed their cattle, for then the lions would have done wrong (*dwir*) and they would be in the right (*cuong*) in retaliating. This lineage has *mut luony*, spear of lion, for its spear-name. Another friend, Rainen of the Leek tribe, told me that he used to respect lions because his paternal grandfather's mother had been born twin to a lion in Dinkaland (she was a Dinka), the lion twin having run away into the bush. He said, however, that he had ceased to respect them when they began to eat his cattle. He conceded that the lions which ate his cattle were small lions from Dinkaland and not the large lions of Nuerland, but he felt he had been wronged by lions as a body and now refused to respect lions of any kind. He said '*ce theak thuk*', 'the respect is finished'. The same man told me that in the past, before lions began to eat his cattle, he had sometimes tied up a goat in the bush for them, and they had taken it. In the terminology I am using he had a totemistic relationship to lions. I have no certain knowledge that any mammalian species besides the lion is the primary totem of a Nuer lineage. The waterbuck, as will be seen later, is a secondary totem of a large clan.

A considerable number of lineages respect reptilian species. 776x
The large lineage of the Lak tribe who are known as *cieng* Gangni 613

776 respect the monitor lizard. The story is told that long ago some
613 people of *cieng* Gangni were dying of thirst on a journey. They were wandering, light-headed with thirst and the heat of the sun, when they saw a monitor lizard in a *thep*-tree (*Acacia verugera*). They intended to kill it but it escaped them and following it brought them to water, to which, being a water creature, it naturally made. Ever since, their descendants have respected the lizard and dedicated cows of their herds to the lizard-spirit. I was told that if there is one of them present when a Nuer of a different clan kills one of these lizards, as apparently sometimes happens, he throws a bead or some grass on to its body to make recompense (*ba je col*), because he saw his totem killed. I was told also that should a man of *cieng* Gangni knowingly eat of its flesh he would die, while should he eat of it unknowingly he might fall sick or become crazy. Nuer also say that should a man who respects the lizard harm it he may beget a child with deformed legs resembling the legs of the lizard. The *cieng* Gangni also respect the *thep*-tree for the reason given in the story I have related and, though why I do not know, the *keac* tree (*Crataeva religiosa*) and *pak*, the Dead Sea apple (*Calotropis procera*). One of their spear-names is *mut thep*, the spear of the *thep*-tree, and one of their honorific titles is *gat thep*, son of the *thep*-tree.

There are a number of lineages in different parts of Nuerland who respect crocodiles and dedicate cows to the crocodile-spirit, the Cany major lineage of the eastern Gaajak being one of the
[773] largest. The reason given for the totemic relationship is a twin-birth of an ancestor with a crocodile's egg, the egg having been placed in a stream. I was told that a twin-birth of this kind may occur at any time in a lineage which respects the crocodile. Mem-
●[782] bers of these lineages are said sometimes to milk the cows dedicated to the crocodile-spirit and to pour the milk into a stream in which there are crocodiles. One of their honorific clan-names may be *nya nyanga*, daughter of the crocodile. It is said that should a man who respects crocodiles harm one of the reptiles without cause, or eat its flesh, he may beget a child with a rudimentary arm resembling a crocodile's leg; and I was told of a woman of one of these lineages who ate crocodile flesh, thinking that it was turtle flesh, and afterwards bore a child so deformed that it had to crawl on its belly. Those who respect crocodiles enjoy a special immunity from their attacks and I have been

assured by old men when about to wade through crocodile- 776 x
infested streams that I need have no fear, because people whose 613
totem was the crocodile lived nearby, and they contrasted the
benevolence of their local crocodiles with the savagery of croco-
diles in other districts. When once I remarked to a Nuer about
a man fishing far out in the Sobat river, in a place I knew to be
infested with crocodiles, that I thought he was taking a big risk,
my companion simply replied 'maybe he respects crocodiles'. I
have also been told that men of these lineages call the reptiles out
of the water and stroke them. There can be no doubt that people
who have the crocodile for totem are regarded by other Nuer as [789]
having some control over them. They are summoned by their
neighbours to perform a rite to prevent crocodiles from attacking
them or their flocks and herds when streams and rivers must be
crossed. The *gwan kwoth nyanga*, the person who possesses the
crocodile-spirit (who has the crocodile for totem), bends a metal
bracelet till the ends overlap and binds them in this position with
grass, and then presses the bracelet into the river mud, calling on
gwandong, grandfather or ancestor (in this context, the crocodile-
spirit), to let the people pass over in safety. This operation closes
the jaws of the crocodiles while people and cattle are in the water.
He may also, on certain occasions, as when a stream is being fished,
bind a goat and push it under weeds and reeds into the stream for
the crocodile-spirit at the same time as performing the bracelet
rite; and it is said that he must then sit on the bank and abstain
from drinking water while people are still in the stream.

A large number of small lineages in Nuerland respect snakes. [177]
All those whose descent I was able to trace are of Dinka origin.
Some respect *nyal*, the python. Those I have asked about their [773]
totemic affiliation have told me that a python was born as twin
to their ancestor. When they sacrifice to the python-spirit they 776 x
take a goat to the edge of the stream and there kill it, in imitation 613
of the python's killing of its prey, by blocking its mouth and 782 ●
nostrils and bouncing on its belly till it suffocates. They throw a
piece of the sacrificial meat into the stream and another piece
towards the land. They boil the rest of the meat, taking care that
no soup of the boiling is spilt, and eat it. A senior man then
sharpens a new cattle-peg and, after driving it into the ground
and winding grass round it, pours some of the blood of the goat
at its foot, asking the python-spirit to take its 'cow' and let the

x776 people be at peace. They complete the rite by building a small
613 mound of ashes as a shrine (*yik*) to the spirit. I have seen goats
●782 with what the Nuer call *ma nyal*, python-like, markings dedicated
[778] to the python-spirit in kraals. A Lou tribesman told me that when he was a boy a python entered his father's kraal and paid particular attention to a goat dedicated to its spirit, and his father gave it milk in a gourd and rubbed its scales with butter. All Nuer say that if any snake enters the homestead of a man who respects that species he will offer it milk and rub its scales with butter, but I have not seen this done. They say that a snake which has been treated with these courtesies may enter the byre and sleep there and, when it wakes, crawl among the cattle in the kraal, paying friendly attention to the cow or beast of the flock dedicated to its spirit. A man who respects pythons respects also bees, because Nuer consider their markings to be like those of the python, and will not kill them or eat their honey.

x776 Another snake respected by a large number of small lineages of
613 Dinka descent is *lualdit* or *rir*, which I believe to be the tree cobra.
A Nuer of the Leek tribe told me how this totem had come into
[771] his family, and his story has some interest in that it illustrates the
[773] way in which a lineage may acquire a totem. His father was digging a hole in which to plant a support to a new cattle byre when he scooped up a cobra with the earth in his hands. In his fright he killed it with a digging-stick. Later he fell sick and the form of a cobra appeared to him in a dream and told him that it wanted a *duor*, a gift, so he sacrificed an ox to the cobra-spirit and dedicated a cow to it. His sons now respect the cobra, and their descendants may continue to do so. During my first expedition to Nuerland one of my Zande servants was chased into my tent by one of these cobras and I was forced to shoot it. Later in the day a man of the cattle camp where I was residing came to complain that I had killed his *kwoth*, totem, when I might easily have sent to ask him to remove it from my tent. He demanded compensation, which I made with a lump of tobacco. Some people say that if you can
[825] kill a cobra without it seeing you, you will find *wal*, medicine,
inside it. If it sees you it will spit out the medicine before you can kill it. Those who respect the cobra respect also the little red soldier ants, here again apparently on account of a resemblance of colour.[1] When bitten by them they do not slap them on their

---

[1] Dr. Lienhardt tells me that a beast dedicated to the spirit of cobra should

PLATE III

●782

Sacrifice of ox by suffocation

[facing p. 68]

×776 613 773 I have been told that there is a small lineage, called Waloak, in eastern Gaajok country who respect tortoises. There is a curious story accounting for their adoption of this totem. A man of the lineage had his cow taken by a man of a neighbouring village and his repeated requests for it to be returned to him were unavailing. One day when he was going to the river he found a tortoise and wrapped it in a sheepskin. He continued on his way, and as he was passing the village of the people who had taken his cow, he took the opportunity of once more asking for it. They refused his request, but at that moment the tortoise poked its head against the skin pressing it outwards. The man bent over it and told it to be quiet as it would get its share that day. Again he asked for his cow and again it was refused, and once more the tortoise wriggled in the skin and was told to be quiet. The people of the village then became frightened because they thought that the man had some powerful medicine in the sheepskin and that, if they did not give his cow back to him, they might die with their children and cattle; so they surrendered the cow. The mention of medicine suggests a recent origin for the story.

×776 613 Some lineages respect birds. The Jibegh of western Nuerland respect the ostrich and will not use its feathers as ornaments. Their spear-name is *mut wuot*, spear of the ostrich. It is said that ostriches will not eat the millet of members of this clan. [826] I once met a man with only three toes, stocky and undeveloped, to one of his feet. I was told that his maternal grandmother had the ostrich for totem, and that on the day of her daughter's marriage one of the bridegroom's people, as is the custom, threw a spear at her mud windscreen. She took the spear as her right and on examining it found that part of the shaft was bound with ostrich-skin. When her daughter bore a son he was deformed as I have described. The ostriches—or, rather, the spirit of ostrich—had stamped the likeness of an ostrich on the child.

Some small lineages of Dinka origin respect cattle egrets. One such lineage are the Rial of western Nuerland. I also met Lou ●[782] tribesmen who have the cattle egret for totem and I was present when some of them sacrificed a goat to the cattle egret-spirit on the bank of the Sobat river, not because anyone was sick, which is a common occasion of sacrifice to a totem-spirit, 'but just because they think of (*tim*) it'. This spirit is said to be a river-spirit because they sacrifice to it at the river's edge, near which cattle egrets are generally to be seen. 776× 613

I am uncertain whether the many little species of birds the Nuer class together as *kec*—weaver-birds (the Sudan dioch), finches, and others, known collectively in the Sudan as durra-birds—are rightly regarded as the totem of lineages or whether the spirit associated with them is possessed by individuals and not by groups. It may be that only the son who takes on the ritual functions of a *gwan keca* or *gwan kwoth keca*, an owner of durra-bird or an owner of the spirit of durra-bird, respects these little birds, and not all his sons or all members of his lineage; but I [177] believe that they are respected by small lineages of Dinka and Anuak descent and therefore include them in the list of Nuer totems. The Nuer class, as we do, all these little birds together because they feed together on millet seed. They may be seen to rise in swarms from the millet gardens and, whilst in most years Nuer pay little attention to them, they are in some years so numerous and destructive that the entire crop is threatened. It is then necessary to protect it by posting boys, sometimes on platforms erected for the purpose, to scare them off. The owners of 776× the threatened gardens may also summon a man who respects 613 the birds to induce them to depart. He takes some stems of millet 782● of different varieties from each of the gardens of the village and, carrying this bundle, heads a procession of the villagers to where the gardens meet the bush. There he utters an invocation over the goat, telling the birds that it is their cow and exhorting them to turn towards the bush where they will find plenty of grass seed to eat, for that is the millet of the birds. He tells them that the people have come out of their village to greet (*lor*) them with a 'cow' (goat) and requests them to leave the millet alone. When he has sacrificed the goat to the durra-bird-spirit he places the millet he has gathered on the ground with their heads facing the bush to show the birds the direction in which it is desired that they should go. I was told that the carcass is left in the bush. On the occasion on which I was present an expert had been brought from some distance to perform the rite, and a local man, who also respected the birds and could therefore have performed it, felt slighted, and was said to have threatened that next year he would cut stalks of millet before the harvest was ripe. Nuer often cut stalks of unripe millet to chew, but a man who has these birds for totem must not do so,(71) lest he cause the birds to devour the crop.

are the *thep*-tree, papyrus, the *kwel*-tree (*Ficus platyphylla*), and *lel*, the dom palm.[1] 776 x 613

Some lineages respect rivers and streams. The ancestor of the [177] Juak lineage of western Nuerland, of Dinka descent, is said to [773] have come out of a big lagoon called *gwol*, so his descendants are known as Juak *jigwol* and the honorific titles of their sons and daughters are *gat* and *nya gwol*, son and daughter of (the lagoon) *gwol*. They respect all rivers and streams, and when a man of the lineage intends to cross a river he throws a bead into the water [782] calling on his 'grandfather' (the river-spirit) to accept the offering and bring him in safety to the other side. A woman of the lineage will not take off her skirt when crossing a river as other women do, and unmarried girls, who are naked, place a few wisps of grass round their loins before entering the water. I was told that were a married woman to forget and step into the water naked, and were then to remember her obligation, she would return to the bank and pull off a bead or tassel from her skirt and throw it into the water, telling the river-spirit that she had not purposely offended it and asking it to accept her offering in atonement. The [773] Gaatiek clan also respect rivers, and the Nile in particular because God brought their ancestor out of it. Being *jiyier*, river-people, they respect also the *gwot yier*, papyrus, and will not cut it. Their spear-names are *mut kier* and *mut yier*, spear of the Nile and spear of the river, and their honorific names are *gat* and *nya bar*, son and daughter of lagoon. They dedicate black cows to the Nile- 776 x
spirit and they sometimes pour a libation of milk from these cows 613
into rivers. When people are taking their families and cattle across 782
rivers they milk one of the black cows dedicated to the river-spirit 791
into a black snail-shell, which a man of the clan then turns upside down at the river's edge and keeps pressed into the mud while the people and herds pass over. This keeps the jaws of the crocodiles closed. In virtue of their relationship to rivers certain senior members of the lineage may also perform a rite for the safety of those

---

[1] Mr. H. C. Jackson, op. cit., p. 165, records that one of the clans of the Bul tribe respect the tree called in Arabic *duruba*, because their ancestor hid in this tree when fleeing from avengers. It is called *rir* in Nuer and is probably to be identified with *Pseudocedrela kotschyi*. Professor and Mrs. Seligman, op. cit., p. 213, say that the *hac* tree is respected by the Bul Nuer because their miracle-working ancestor used to sit under it, and by the Jidiet clan because their ancestor was killed with clubs made of its wood. They do not on this occasion tell us the sources of their statements.

x776
613
●782
791

[535]

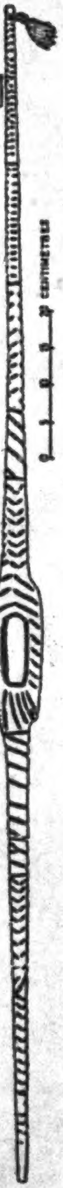


FIG. 2
Girl's
dancing-
stick

taking part in fishing battues. Such a man is called *gwan biedh*, owner of fish-spear, and *kuaar juaini*, priest of grass, because he protects the people by winding grass round the point of a fishing-spear which he then drives into the earth. He also fills a snail-shell with mud and presses it into the mud of the river, and he bends and binds together the points of a metal bracelet and stamps it into the mud. He may also bind a goat and place it in the river as a sacrifice to the river-spirit, which he calls on to protect the people against the dangers of the water. I was told that he must not himself take part in the fishing, but must sit on the bank and abstain from drinking water. He can also heal wounds caused by fish-spears by spitting in them. The Gaatiek clan is probably of Dinka origin.

x776
613
[177]
782

The Nyanding river in the eastern Jikany country is the totem of a small lineage of Anuak descent who live on its banks. It is said that once upon a time the river-spirit asked for a bride, and a girl was decked for marriage and thrown into it by her father Juac, whose name means 'grass' in Nuer. This girl who was sacrificed to the river-spirit (*ca je kok yir*) was called Nyanding. I was told that 'she was not drowned, the river took her', and that she became part of the river-spirit. The present 'owner' of the river, Monytuk Joak, a man of this lineage, told me that each year he binds a goat and throws it into the river. He also protects people taking part in large-scale fishing by treating a bracelet and a shell in the manner I have described. When a girl of the lineage is married, a male goat and a female goat are paid as part of the bridewealth. The male goat is sacrificed to the river-spirit and the female goat is dedicated to it.

x776
613
[177]

Some Nuer lineages respect cattle with certain markings. The Kwok lineage of western Nuerland and their kinsmen among the Atwot people (a section of the Nuer who have to a large extent adopted Dinka culture) will not keep in their herds an animal with *ma ŧeng* markings, that is an animal which has a coloured back but is otherwise white. If one is calved by their cows they

x776 children now respect this species of snake. Mgr. Mlakic records
761 how a Nuer who has a tree for his totem told him that one of his
ancestors had died from being pricked by a thorn of that tree.
Anything may thus become a totem. Mgr. Mlakic also recounts
how a Nuer refused to accept a milleme coin the Father offered
him because a boy of his family, when playing with a milleme,
got it into his ear and died. The family now respect millemes.[1]
x776 A youth, a friend of mine in western Nuerland, had recently
825 acquired a respect for speckled vultures. The Nuer consider it
a misfortune if a speckled vulture, a hooded vulture, a Goliath
heron, a maribou stork, or an egret settles on the crown of a byre
or dwelling-hut. *'Theke ke, cike de nyur wi tie'*, 'they (the birds)
respect them (byres and huts), they ought not to settle on their
●[782] crowns'. If this happens a goat is sacrificed and the bird is asked
why it should settle on a habitation. It is requested to accept the
offering and take itself and all badness from the homestead. Nuer
say that the bird is *kwoth*, Spirit, but, here again, they do not
mean that the bird is in itself Spirit but that it is a form in which
Spirit is beholden. Nuer know that the bird is *kwoth* only through
its unusual behaviour. The man to whom I have referred went
some years ago with a party of men to find a cow which had died
in the bush. When they found it, some speckled vultures rose from
the carcass and one of them settled on the man's head. This caused
great consternation because its settling on the man's head showed
the presence of Spirit. As soon as the party reached home a goat
[782] was sacrificed and left in the bush for the vultures to eat. From
that time the man respected vultures. One day he told me that the
night before he had dreamt of this incident and had early that
morning visited a female diviner (*tiet*) to find out whether his
dream presaged anything bad for him. She assured him that no
harm would come to him as the vulture-spirit had been sacrificed
to (*ca kir*) in the first place. If it had not been satisfied it would
have caused him sickness long ago. All he need now do, she said,
was to cut a piece off a goat's ear and tell the vultures that it was
his gift to them. This he had at once done. I do not know of any
lineages which have the vulture as their totem, but it became a
totem for this man by its action of alighting on his head. Since
such an event is regarded by Nuer as a manifestation of Spirit,
through the happening there came into being for this man a

---

[1] Op. cit.

value, nor do they accept all claims to spiritual guidance at their face value. 000

Nuer also class among the *kuth piny*, the tellurian spirits, certain nature sprites they call *bieli*, and also certain fetishes or spirits of 'medicines'. I give only such a brief and condensed account of these notions as is sufficient to indicate their nature. It is unnecessary to discuss them at length for Nuer regard them, like the practices of their diviners and leeches, as so low a manifestation of Spirit as to be almost something of a different kind. 776x

Nevertheless, here again, some reference to them must be made because they are spoken of as *kuth*, spirits. Moreover, the nature sprites are spoken about, and in some respects are treated, as having some resemblance to the spirits of the air, though much inferior to them, being associated with things, material objects in which they are manifested and to which they are in a sense bound; although it must be emphasized that it is not the things themselves which are regarded as Spirit. This is clear from the fact that the spirits are thought to become attached to, or detached from, them. Their presence in objects and processes is known by luminosity or phosphorescence. We see here again the implicit metaphor, which runs through Nuer religion, of light and dark, associated with sky and earth; and the word *biel* is probably the same as that meaning 'colour', which for Nuer is not an absolute abstraction but a relationship of light and dark shades.

One of these sprites is the *biel pam*, the meteorite-sprite, also called *biel pauka*, ash-sprite. It is, I believe, the same as that called *biel nhial*, sky-sprite, and *biel mac*, fire-sprite. Like all the nature sprites, it can be purchased from its owner (*gwan bila*)—for a goat or two in the first place. I was told that he does not hand over the meteorite itself but a small gourd containing ashes of cattle-dung—hence the name ash-sprite. The purchaser hangs this from the porch of his byre and sacrifices a goat to the sprite, telling it that he will one day dedicate a cow to it and asking it to fall. The gourd of ashes remains in the byre till a meteorite falls. When it does so, the man anoints it with butter and makes a sacrifice, and he then lays it on the floor at the back of his hut. One day '*be macde dop wi pam, be cu pet*', 'it (the sprite) lights its fire on the surface of the meteorite, and then it burns (shines)'. When the man sees this light he sacrifices a goat and makes beer and gives a feast at which the assembled people clap their hands and sing hymns to the 776x 782

x 776 sprite in the manner I have described when speaking of the spirits
●782 of the air. He must then give the man from whom he purchased the sprite some cattle to get him to invoke it, asking it to assist the purchaser and not to harm his family, for spirits of this kind are regarded as dangerous for the families of their possessors. They may protect their owners and bring them good fortune, but they are also liable to turn on members of their families and kin if they are not frequently offered gifts. The new owner now hangs the meteorite in a gourd in his hut and hangs also near it offerings of butter, ashes, and tobacco in other gourds.

x 776 Similar sprites are the *bieli yier*, river-sprites. They are found,
825 under the name *biel roa*, hippopotamus-sprite, in some hippopotamuses, and also in certain fish, *rec car*, *ludh* (lung-fish), *lek*,
782 and *ril*.[1] Nuer declare that '*cike mat*', 'they have congregated', in certain hippopotamuses. It is said that if a man kills one of these animals he will see a light on its head, and that afterwards the sprite will seize him. He breaks the skull of the animal with an axe and takes out the brains and boils them, rubs a little of the boiled brains on his forehead and right arm, and eats the rest of them. Shortly afterwards he falls sick, and if his surmise that it is the sprite which has made him sick is confirmed by a prophet, or by a possessor of this or another kind of sprite, a hand-clapping and hymn-singing ceremony is held, in the course of which the sick man becomes dissociated and the sprite speaks through his lips, saying what it is and what it wants. A sacrifice is then made
[778] and the bones and chyme of the victim are placed near the entrance to the man's hut and a mound of ashes is piled over them, forming a shrine (*yik bila*), into the top of which a branch of the *nyuot*-tree is stuck. The sprite then leaves the man, but he continues to pay it attention from time to time, dedicating an animal to it and making it offerings, and his children may continue to do
x 776 so after his death. Other *bieli* are the *biel jiath*, tree-sprite, *biel real*, termite mound-sprite, and what is sometimes called *kwoth juaini*, spirit of grasses, which manifests itself in a will-o'-the-wisp coming from rotting swamp vegetation and is perhaps the same as *kwoth doar*, spirit of the bush. Dr. Howell speaks also of a *biel rir*, cobra-sprite, and a *biel loi*, cattle peg-sprite, connected with

---

[1] For identifications of some of the fish mentioned in this chapter see Sabet Girgis, 'A List of Common Fish of the Upper Nile with their Shilluk, Dinka, and Nuer Names', *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1948, pp. 122–5.

context of their common humanity, as, for example, when furious 776 x
storms are raging, in times of severe drought and famine, or when
a man is seriously ill, then God alone, or in certain circumstances
one of his hypostases by which he is figured in relation to some
particular natural phenomenon, is addressed and he is not, as it
were, divided by a variety of titles along the lines of the social
structure. This may also be to a large extent the case even where
different social groups are involved, so long as they are not antagonistic
but have a common interest and intention. I give one
such illustration.

A youth in a village where I was residing was badly wounded 627
in the shoulder by a spear in a fight with a man of the next village. 782 ●
His antagonist had not intended to kill him and the people of the 776 x
two villages were on good terms, so his kinsmen at once sent the
spear with which the wound had been inflicted to the injured
youth's home with expressions of regret and wishes for a speedy
recovery. The elders of the wounded lad's home bent the point of [755]
the spear and placed it point downwards in a pot of cold water.
This was done to lessen the pain of the wound, especially when it was washed, and to cool the inflammation. Next morning the wounder's village sent us a deputation, leading a goat for sacrifice. By this further indication of their regrets and of their willingness to pay compensation at once should the lad die they anticipated a blood-feud. It was hoped in any case that the danger of death would be obviated by the sacrifice of the goat. The wound would, as the Nuer put it, 'be finished with the goat'.

Before the animal was sacrificed the visitors consecrated it by rubbing ashes on its back. It was then tied to a stake opposite the hut of the wounded youth's maternal grandmother and an invocation was delivered over it by a man called Lel, a leopard-skin priest and also a prophet, who had been summoned from a distance to officiate, partly, I think, because his presence would give greater importance, and therefore perhaps efficacy, to the ceremony and partly because it would be a further insurance for a peaceful outcome to the incident. His address was largely taken up with reiterations that the youth would not die and with giving to God and the people a lengthy and detailed account of how the accident had occurred. He sacrificed the goat at the conclusion of his speech. Our home party then brought forward a wether and it was also consecrated with ashes. Afterwards a man of the home

627 ●782 ×776 poured a libation of water over its tethering-peg as a prelude to delivering an oration. He told the story of the accident all over again and commented on it to God in this vein: 'ah God! We call on you about this wound. There is no enmity between us [the party of the injured youth and the party of the spearer]. This wound came of itself [they do not attribute it to the spearer because it was an accident and also because the youth will not die and so there will be no *thung*, debt of homicide]. Throw the badness away with this cow [they call a sheep or goat a 'cow' in sacrificial contexts]. Let the wound heal. Ah God! it is only a headache [it is not a sickness of any importance—they speak of the most ghastly wounds in this way], let it be finished, let it go right on [heal without complications]. Let it be removed from the man's body. Let us be at peace.' Another man of the home party also made an invocation in much the same language: 'Friend (*maadh*), God who is in this village, as you are very great we tell you about this wound, for you are God of our home in very truth. We tell you about the fight of this lad. Let the wound heal. Let it be ransomed [with the sheep]'; and so forth. A representative of the visitors now said a few words to the same purpose and the sheep was then sacrificed. The meat of both sacrifices was eaten by the people of the home after the visiting deputation had departed; and also the carcass of a third animal, another wether, which the people of the home later sacrificed after three of them had made further invocations over it in much the same vein.

In this ceremony Spirit was addressed simply as *kwoth* and no designated refractions were mentioned, and when on such occasions Nuer speak to, or about, *kwoth* without differentiating specifications they are, as I have explained, speaking to, or about, Spirit in the comprehensive conception of God the creator and the sustainer of life. This is often the case in their sacrifices, and it is the same when they pray for peace and deliverance from evil.

×776 613 That emphasis is given to the refractions when a social group, acting as such and marking itself off from other groups, makes a sacrifice on behalf of itself or of one of its members in virtue of his membership of it, and that they are then to be regarded as diverse exclusive representations of God by which he is figured to the groups concerned in a special way as their patrons is evident also from other considerations. It is clear that totemic spirits of lineages are Spirit conceived of in a tutelary relationship to the

×776 Moreover, though God is God of all men he is not only conceived of, in the various totemic and other representations we ●782 have considered, as the special patron of descent, and sometimes of local, groups, but each family regards him, without specific differentiation of title, as having a particular relation to itself; and he may be spoken about in terms of a particular household, hamlet, or village community. One hears Nuer say in invocations, as in the one I have just recorded, 'God who is in this village', or 'God who is in this home'. When a Nuer builds a byre he holds a small ceremony before its central support is erected. Beer is prepared, and before the people drink it the master of ceremonies or the owner of the byre pours a libation of it to God and the ghosts at the entrance to the byre and in the centre of it, where the hearth and shrine will be, and asks God to give peace and prosperity to the home, its people and its cattle. They think then of God looking after their home in a special way, of being particularly attached to it so that he then becomes, as it were, in a special sense the family's God, a household God. The shrine, a forked post, is the [778] altar of God within the home, God of the hearth, as well as being associated with any of his particular representations—totemic, *colwic*, air-spirits, &c.—in which he may stand in a tutelary relationship to the lineage or family of the owner of the homestead, and also with the ancestral ghosts. He is spoken of in this domestic representation as *kwoth rieka*, God of the post (shrine). Further, every member of a Nuer lineage, whether or not it has totemic or other specifically designated spirits, will in invocations speak of '*kwoth gwara*', 'spirit of our fathers', or in reference to the name of the ancestor of the lineage or clan, just as the Old Testament speaks of 'the God of our fathers' or 'the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob'. Similarly one hears the leopard-skin priests address God as '*kwoth Geaka*', 'spirit of Gee'. Gee was the first leopard-skin priest from whom all the leopard-skin priests derive their powers, so that the expression refers to God figured as patron of priests; though it also has a wider, national, sense, for Gee was also the ancestor of the most important Nuer clans.

×776 Apart from the use of names or titles as diacritical signs to indicate an inclusive or exclusive relationship to God, Nuer make the same distinction grammatically through their inclusive or exclusive pronominal suffixes. These particles are rather complicated when they are attached to family and kinship terms, as in

× 776 meaning of 'his spirit', 'their spirit', and so forth; in other words,
196 where the statement makes it clear that what is being spoken of
is Spirit conceived of in relation to particular persons only. We still have to ask, however, in what sense the crocodile is Spirit for these persons.

Since it is difficult to discuss a statement that something which can be observed, crocodile, is something more than what it appears to be when this something more, Spirit, cannot be observed, it is helpful first to consider two examples of Nuer statements that things are something more than they appear to be when both the subject term and the predicate term refer to observable phenomena.

× 776 When a cucumber is used as a sacrificial victim Nuer speak of
196 it as an ox. In doing so they are asserting something rather more
than that it takes the place of an ox. They do not, of course, say
● 782 that cucumbers are oxen, and in speaking of a particular cucumber
811 as an ox in a sacrificial situation they are only indicating that it
may be thought of as an ox in that particular situation; and they act accordingly by performing the sacrificial rites as closely as possible to what happens when the victim is an ox. The resemblance is conceptual, not perceptual. The 'is' rests on qualitative analogy. And the expression is asymmetrical, a cucumber is an ox, but an ox is not a cucumber.

× 776 A rather different example of this way of speaking is the Nuer
196 assertion that twins are one person and that they are birds.[1] When
811 they say 'twins are not two persons, they are one person' they are
845 not saying that they are one individual but that they have a single
personality. It is significant that in speaking of the unity of twins they only use the word *ran*, which, like our word 'person', leaves sex, age, and other distinguishing qualities of individuals undefined. They would not say that twins of the same sex were one *dhol*, boy, or one *nyal*, girl, but they do say, whether they are of the same sex or not, that they are one *ran*, person. Their single social personality is something over and above their physical duality, a duality which is evident to the senses and is indicated by the plural form used when speaking of twins and by their treatment in all respects in ordinary social life as two quite distinct individuals. It is only in certain ritual situations, and symbolically,

---

[1] I have given a more detailed account in 'Customs and Beliefs Relating to Twins among the Nilotic Nuer', *Uganda Journal*, 1936.

man's chest as he stands in it. Nuer say that were a man to be 764
buried in a shallow grave and his corpse to be scratched up by hyenas he would haunt those responsible. The head of the corpse is shaved and all ornaments are removed from the body before burial. A man goes to the grave as naked as he was born. A woman is buried in her loin skin, closely drawn between the legs. The legs of both sexes are flexed and one arm is placed under the head and the other over it as the corpse lies on its right side on a strip of ox-hide. Another strip of ox-hide is placed over it and pieces are also placed over the ears to prevent earth entering them. I believe that in western Nuerland a man is buried facing east and a woman facing west, but in eastern Nuerland both sexes are buried facing west. Nuer have told me that this is because the eastern Nuer came orginally from the west and that it was in western Nuerland that their ancestors were created; but, as will be seen, they also associate the passage from birth to death with the movement of the sun across the sky. The grave-diggers heap the earth they dig around the edge of the shaft, five heaps for a man and four for a woman. When filling the shaft they sit or stand with their backs to it and scoop the earth back with their hands, at first slowly and then quickly, from each heap in turn. When the earth is above the level of the ground they beat it down. The small hump which is left is stamped down a few days later so that there is then no sign of the grave, unless it is an old woman's grave, when her pipe or neckrest or cooking-pot may be placed on it. Graves are not places of cult and are not long remembered. I have never heard a man speak of the grave of an ancestor or kinsman. The dead man's hut continues to be occupied after the women have beaten it inside and outside with wild rice. Persons killed by lightning, twins, and holders of certain ritual offices have special modes of burial (pp. 54–55 and 129–30).

When the burial is completed the master of ceremonies of the dead man's family dips a handful of wild rice in water and asperses the grave-diggers with it. They then go to the nearest stream to wash themselves. They may not drink water before they have been aspersed and have washed lest they die of the consequences (*nueer*). A few days later the master of ceremonies
sprinkles all the people of the homestead and close kin who live 764
nearby in the same manner and sacrifices an animal to God, an 782
ox if the dead man had a large herd, otherwise one of the flock,

764 in front of the dead man's hut. He also addresses the ghost and
● 782 tells him that he has been taken away and must turn his face to the ground and not trouble the living: 'friend, this (beast) is yours (for you). Now turn yourself to the ghosts. Turn yourself away from us. Death was not made by us in old times, it was made by God, friend. Do not trouble your people with bad dreams but regard us favourably. God has not entirely destroyed you, for there are those who come after you; you have children left behind you.' If the family have no animal to sacrifice the master of ceremonies sacrifices by cutting in two a wild cucumber. 'The half of the living, the half of the children, the right half, remains outside, being placed in the thatch of the hut. The half of the dead man is thrown into the bush.' With it is thrown out of the village the contagion of death. They say of this sacrifice '*ba kier piny ka del*', '(the dead man) is expiated in the earth with a goat', and that the badness goes into the earth with the blood and the chyme.

765 Members of the family mourn till the mortuary ceremony has been held some months after death. They shave their heads after the burial but then they do not shave them again, neither do they treat the hair with ashes nor depilate their bodies, till the period of mourning is ended. They also remove all ornaments, and the closest relatives wear a *dep liath*, a mourning cord of grass, around their waists and necks. There are no prescribed food and sex abstentions during the period of mourning though I was told that close kin may abstain from sexual relations for a few days after death 'because they are sad and thinking of their dead friend'. Less closely related persons and the wives of kin show their respect by leaving their hair untended but for a shorter time, perhaps only a month or so. When people are in mourning they do not attend dances. People do not mourn for a small child, for
[858] 'a small child is not a person (*ran*). When he tethers the cattle and herds the goats he is a person. When he cleans the byres and spreads the dung out to dry and collects it and carries it to the fires he is a person.' A man will not say that he has a son till the
[766] child is about six years of age. A small child is buried by old women and without sacrifice.

765 Four to six months after burial the mortuary ceremony is held.
775 It is known as *wocene cuol* or *cuol woc* because its purpose is to wipe out (*woc*) the debt (*cuol*) which Nuer feel to be due on account of the death. They seem to feel that there is some mis-

fortune hanging over them and that the death may be only part 765
of it. It is necessary to clear off the whole debt before any further 775
evil comes to them. Otherwise people may cut their feet when fishing, pierce their feet when hunting, cut themselves with spears when dancing, or indeed meet with almost any misfortune, even death. Nuer also feel that if the dead is not appeased by this ceremony he may return in anger to fetch the living, especially his wives and children, and the cattle.

I have only once witnessed this ceremony, rather early in my 765
study of the Nuer, and I have supplemented my account of what 782
I then saw with statements made to me later. The ceremony was held at Dini in the Lou tribal area for the ghost of an important old man called Lam. When I arrived at the dead man's village towards evening the people had just sacrificed an ox outside his kraal. This sacrifice had been for Tutthiang, Lam's father, for it was known that Lam had intended before he died to sacrifice this animal in his father's honour. Next morning, before sunrise, an ox and a cow and its bull-calf were speared at their tethering-pegs in Lam's kraal. People watched to see how they fell; because if a sacrificed animal falls over cleanly on its side, especially if it falls on its right side, it is a good omen and shows that the ghost is content, whereas if it falls on its head or totters about before falling it is a bad omen. It is regarded as important that a cow still giving milk should be sacrificed for the ghost of an old man who had a position in his community lest he should feel that sufficient sacrifice had not been made. To kill a cow in milk is the greatest sacrifice a Nuer can make. An animal must be sacrificed for each wife of the dead by one of her sons or by some kinsman on behalf of her hut. If the ceremony is for a young unmarried man his favourite ox should be sacrificed. A cow should be sacrificed for a senior woman if the herd is large, and a male calf for a young woman. However, there are no hard and fast rules about the matter. The people of the home should sacrifice what they can afford, cattle if possible, but a goat or sheep if they cannot obtain at least a male calf, which is unlikely, because a man can generally borrow one from a neighbour.

At Dini after the cattle had been killed they were skinned and 764
the meat apportioned to the various categories of kin. It is an 782
absolute rule, however, that no member of the ghost's age-set 561
may partake of the meat of animals sacrificed at his mortuary

765 ●782 [561] ceremony, and I was told that it is dangerous for them even to smell the cooking meat. Everyone then moved off to sit in front of a hut to listen to the commemorative orations, which are also invocations; and here were spread out on the ground the ghost's possessions, his fighting-spears and fishing-spears, his beads, his metal arm-rings, his ostrich-shell girdles, his pipe, and, since his son was senior government interpreter in the district, his clothes and whistle, articles not possessed by ordinary Nuer. At the side of these were placed the heads and hides of the cattle which had just been sacrificed. The people sat with their backs to the now rising sun and facing the direction of the setting sun because 'death follows the setting sun'. Nuer say that 'the west is the side of [823] [196] death, the east the side of life', and the verb *kwony* in their language means both 'to bury' and 'to set' (the sun). When they sacrifice an ox for a sick man they hope it will fall towards the east. The master of ceremonies (pp. 287–9) of the ghost's family made the first commemorative oration, after throwing some tobacco towards east and west. As he spoke he walked up and down in front of the people brandishing the spear with which the animals had been sacrificed. He commenced his address (*lam*) by shouting out his ox-name. He must also have shouted out his clan spear-name, though I have not recorded it in my notebooks.

I did not take down his address at the time but I was told later that a master of ceremonies speaks in this wise: 'God, now thou hast given us badness, or is it simply the lot of creation? [Is the death thou hast sent us a special evil designed for us or has the dead man merely suffered what soon or late comes to all created things?] Now thou hast taken so-and-so [he names the dead man], now he has become one of thy people, turn about and take him right away. We who are left in the world, give us peace. Let his children who remain in the world be at peace. He is not finished, his children will carry on his name. In the future they will bear his name. Let no further evil befall us.' The master of ceremonies is now speaking to the ghost: 'So-and-so, my brother [or 'my father' if he was a much older man], now thou art one of God's people. Do not forget us, let it be thy habit to speak [on our behalf] to thy father [God]. When we go into the bush let us tread on wild rice [avoid all dangers and troubles]. Let us beget children. May all evil be taken away from us now, and may we remain in peace.' The master of ceremonies again addresses God: 'God, and

you ghosts! Thou, God, madest man and thou also madest death. 765
[Thou hast said] thou, man, I made thee only that thou mightest 782
perish. God, it is thy world. Thou hast shown us death this year. Now we here, we go about with this debt, there has been no laughing with happiness for us this year; thou hast given us mourning. God, turn about and take away the man thou hast taken. Breathe on us with favourable breath (*ku ko ngok ni yiegh me goagh*). Thou hast taken this man, take also this ox of his together with him.' He addresses the ghost once more: 'and thou, so-and-so, art thou now in the great cattle camp [community] of the dead? Where art thou, our father? Where are all the people of our home? Eh! It is the camp to which we all go at last. We who remain in the world, may we be at peace. May the children thou hast left behind thee rest in peace. Thou who hast gone before do not close thine eyes to us. Thou art a person of God. May there be nothing further bad for us to see.'

The master of ceremonies spoke for a long time in this vein and when he had finished five senior kinsmen made similar orations, one after another, the six addresses taking over four hours to deliver. The kinsmen harangued the ghost. They told him that when his daughters were married he would receive the finest cows of their bridewealth. They asked him to be a good ghost and not to trouble his kinsmen. They frequently admonished him to turn away from them (*ku ro du rit*). They wanted the ghost to look away from them and not to trouble them. His kinship (*mar*) was now with God and not with men. This request to turn away, made to both God and the ghost of the dead man, is a constant refrain in mortuary ceremonies. In a text given by Professor Westerman, the translation of which I have slightly emended, the speaker says on such an occasion, 'Oh God, why dost thou pursue us? Why dost thou pursue us? Turn thyself away, take this thy man and go; let him be sufficient; do not look at us again! In what are we at fault?' And also 'Oh God, take thy cow! And thou [the dead man] turn away! Turn thy face away into the bush! Do not look at us again! We have given thee thine own things, but then leave us alone!'[1] The kinsmen at Dini also told the ghosts that if they must give them something bad they should give them hunger and not sickness and death. They pointed out to the dead man that his age-mates were present to honour him. They implored God

---

[1] Op. cit., pp. 117–18.

765 that they might sleep quietly and their souls be 'cool' (*koce thei*). 782 Their remarks also contained many reflections on life and human destiny and the transience of all living things, and they recounted the deeds of the dead and reiterated that he had left sons to carry [627] on his name and lineage. Speakers and listeners also stated any grievances they had in their hearts towards kinsmen, for any of the kin of the dead man who bears a grudge against a relative must now declare it. If he does not do so now, he must for ever keep silence. This is an occasion for amicable settlement of family and kinship quarrels. Thus at this ceremony the senior wife of Mayan, the eldest son of the dead man, complained that her cow had been given by her husband to his second wife. A wife of the dead man who had gone to live with another man, taking her daughter with her, said that she wished now to live at her dead husband's home, and cattle of her bridewealth which had been returned were sent back again to her people on the day of the ceremony.

765 A part of the ceremony I did not see, for it was taking place elsewhere during these orations, was the preparation of porridge and beer. The master of ceremonies makes three new clay fire-stones, places on them a new pot, and pours water into the pot. He then puts out the old fire in the dead man's homestead, throws its ashes and fire-stones into the bush, and starts a new fire under the pot. He begins the mixing and stirring of the porridge. When the women have cooked the porridge he ladles it out with a new gourd-ladle into a new gourd-dish. All the utensils are new for the occasion. The porridge and a pot of beer were now carried to where we were sitting, and as each of the later speakers rose to make his speech he dipped a gourd-ladle into the pot of beer and poured a libation to the ground.

When the last speech was finished everyone stood up and the master of ceremonies dipped wild rice into a gourdful of milk and aspersed the people with it. He did this many times till everyone had been aspersed. He then sprinkled the dead man's possessions and poured what was left of the milk at the side of a tethering-peg over the dung which had been spread out to dry, and knelt down and kneaded the milk with the dung. I was told that the cattle and huts were also aspersed with milk. I believe that milk is only used in this rite if the dead man was, like Lam, 'a man of the cattle' (pp. 300–2). In the case of a leopard-skin priest water

775 *cunge*', 'his soul was cut off. His soul went with the soul of the
765 (sacrificed) ox together. His flesh alone remains standing.' His
761 soul, the essential part of him, had gone and with it his social
personality. Although people fed him he seems to have lost such privileges of kinship as pertain to the living and not to the dead. I was told that he could not partake of sacrificial meat because his agnatic kinship (*buth*) had been obliterated (*woc*) by the mortuary ceremony. A neighbour said to me 'he lives in our village with Baranyai but we do not count him a member of it because he is dead. The mortuary ceremony has been held for him.'

765 There were doubtless points I missed in the mortuary ceremony I witnessed and possibly some I did not hear about in later discussions with Nuer. A feature I did not observe but which, I was later told, is common, was the singing of hymns to the spirits of the air, in particular the hymn to *buk* which I have recorded earlier. These hymns are not an integral, and therefore essential, part of the ceremony and their meaning is in no way related to the matter in hand. They are in keeping, however, with the religious character of the rites and enhance it.

765 In conclusion I should say that Mayan told me at Dini that he
would later cut the ears of the bulls of his dead father's herd and
782 that this is always done when the dead man was a person of age
and social importance. The cattle would then prosper. For such a man another ox may be sacrificed some months later. The master of ceremonies again prepares porridge for those who gather to honour the ghost, and the senior kinsmen again make speeches to God and to the dead man and to all the ghosts of the lineage. Before the animal is speared all the people, men, women and children, bring ashes of cattle-dung and rub them on the ox. I discuss the meaning of this act in later chapters. The meat is distributed to all present, and also the porridge and the beer, which has been prepared in advance. An ox sacrificed in this manner to honour a dead man is known as *thak bar* or *thak joka*. A man may at any time decide to honour his father in this way and Nuer sometimes set apart an ox or an old bull (*tut jookni*) for their dead fathers, as Lam had done for his father Tutthiang, and await a suitable occasion for sacrificing it, as when they see their fathers in dreams and know that they want something. An ox so set apart cannot be disposed of but must be kept in the herd till it is sacrificed.

the other, and twins are two *pwony* but a single *ran* (p. 128). However, 774
the idea of the soul, as we have noted, seems to be attached 828
chiefly to the concept of *ran*, to belong to the representation of a developed social being. An animal has, or is, a *pwony*, but it is not a *ran*, except in a purely figurative sense.

Nuer do not attribute souls to creatures other than man except 774
perhaps cattle and elephants. They speak of the *tie* of a man at his mortuary ceremony going together with the *tie* of the sacrificed beast away from the living to wherever the ghosts may be, and since in sacrifice, especially in piacular sacrifice, there is an identification, discussed in a later chapter, between man and ox, it is understandable that, at any rate in sacrificial contexts, Nuer should speak of the souls of cattle. But though Nuer imply in relation to sacrifice that cattle have souls, they have no clearly formulated belief to that effect, and I am not sure that they would agree to the proposition if it were put to them as a question unrelated to sacrificial intention. Nevertheless, it may be supposed that since Nuer sometimes speak of an ox's *tie* they think that cattle have in some degree intelligence and will and a personality that survives death, however vague it may be.[1] Moreover, they speak of the ghosts as herding cattle in wherever it is they have their abode. That Nuer reflect on this question, and also that they are undecided about the answer to it, is shown by the fact that Dr. Smith, so she tells me, has often been asked by Nuer whether she thinks cattle have souls.

Though I have never heard Nuer speak of an elephant's *tie*, that it is thought to have one is implicit in the belief that if the rules about the division of the tusks of a slain elephant are not observed the dead beast may *gwor*, track down, those responsible (Dr.
Lienhardt tells me that in Dinka the word means 'to take 774
revenge'). *Gwor* has here, therefore, the same sense as *cien*, haunt. 224
Also, Dr. Howell states that the man who first speared a slain elephant, and is therefore by a convention regarded as responsible for its death, has to have his right arm incised by a leopard-skin priest before he can eat or drink just as if he had slain a man,
and a beast is sacrificed in the one case as in the other. He says [782]

---

[1] That a cow in a kind of way can be thought of as a person is suggested by other facts. A rite is performed to separate twin cows, which are hence, unlike other beasts, regarded till then as being one, as human twins are. A rite is also performed, to prevent the calf sickening, when the first milk of its dam is taken for human consumption. See also Chap. X.

the word *joagh* also means 'back' or 'behind' and this cannot be 775
fortuitous, not only because in Dinka the word for a troublesome 196
ghost, *cien*, likewise also means 'back' and 'behind', but also because it is a common Nuer refrain in speaking to, or about, the ghosts that they should have their backs to the living, the Nuer way of saying that they should keep away from the living. If they return to the living, except when summoned as witnesses on formal occasions, it is only to cause trouble, to fetch the living to join them in the place of the dead or to punish them for faults and shortcomings. We have already noted how pronounced is this apotropaic motif in the mortuary rites, and especially in the invocations spoken at them, the speakers frequently adjuring the dead '*bi rodu rit*', 'turn thyself about'. They ask the dead to turn away from the living, to turn his back on them. Father Crazzolara notes the same sentiment. He says that the dead are buried with their backs to the huts and their faces to the bush and that a dead man is addressed: 'turn thine eyes to the bush, do not turn them to the home'. He comments that this means that the dead man must not regard the doings of the living, for he might see something which offends him and draw another person after him to death.[1] The living do not want the dead to take any interest in their lives. The dead had best look after their own affairs and let the living look after theirs. That the ideas of 'behind' and of 'the ghosts' are related is further shown by the fact that Nuer sometimes use the phrase 'to go behind' as a euphemism for 'to go to the ghosts' and hence 'to die'.

It is consistent with the idea of the ghosts being turned away 775
from the living so that they do not see their affairs that the ghosts 782
are relatively unimportant in Nuer religious thought and practice, even the troublesome ones, which I discuss later; and they are in the ordinary course of affairs seldom mentioned. But though Nuer pay them little attention they cannot entirely ignore them, for there are some occasions when they are directly concerned with what is happening and their relationship to the living has to be emphasized, occasions of collective sacrifice (pp. 198–9), such as their funeral and mortuary ceremonies, settlement of blood-feuds started on account of their violent deaths, and the marriages of their children. Occasionally also dutiful sons honour their memory by sacrifice, especially if they have had vivid dreams

---

[1] Op. cit., p. 173.

775 of the departed. On such occasions Nuer usually have a definite
ghost in mind, but in contexts in which the lineage as a whole is
782 involved they may speak of *jook dial*, all the ghosts (of their
lineage), though I have seldom heard them do so; and the reason
for this is that when, on ceremonial occasions, Nuer speak of a
lineage as a collectivity to which both dead and living belong they
speak in terms of Spirit rather than of ghosts, of '*kwoth* which
created our ancestor', rather than of the ancestor himself, and of
'*kwoth* of our fathers', rather than the fathers themselves. The
conception of the ghosts is subordinated to that of Spirit.

Nuer do not pray (*pal*) to the ghosts, which have no power in
775 themselves to grant requests. On such occasions as I have men-
782 tioned they may invoke (*lam*) them, but even when they do this
776 the ghosts take second place to God in some such phrases as
'*kwoth, yene jook*', 'God, thou and the ghosts'. Even when beasts
are reserved for them, Nuer do not formally dedicate them to the
ghosts as they do to their spirits, and though they sacrifice on
certain occasions on their behalf or in their honour or memory,
I do not think that it can be said that sacrifice is ever made to
them, at any rate not to them by themselves, for it may be that in
those sacrifices in which God and the ghosts are invoked together
Nuer think of the sacrifice being to both. Even if this is so, the
victim is consecrated to God and not to the ghosts. Likewise,
[778] though the ghosts are associated with the *riek* or post-shrine which
elderly men erect in their homes, it is a shrine firstly to God as
God of the hearth and in whatever further refractions he may be
figured as the guardian of the family and lineage. It is therefore
called *riek kwoth*, God's shrine, and not *riek jookni*, ghosts'
shrine. There is no cult of the dead, and their graves, not being
[769] marked, are soon forgotten unless a tree happens to spring from
the tomb, when it may be named after the man buried there. A
man's memorial is not in some monument but in his sons.

768 Dead persons, though for the most part only men, are remem-
bered in their names, and this is a matter of great importance
613 both for the Nuer themselves and also for an understanding on
551 our part of their sentiments. Every man likes to feel that his name
will never be forgotten so long as his lineage endures and that in
that sense he will always be a part of the lineage. Consequently,
Nuer do not so much think of the ghosts of their forebears as being
those members of their lineage who are in the home of the dead,

injustice may take ghostly vengeance. Nuer say also that a ghost 775
watches over his kin and punishes those who commit some grave 626
fault, especially that of depriving his young sons of the cattle of 761
his herd or of their sisters' marriages. When a father or other close kinsman summons a man from the grave to join him in death Nuer use the word *tul*, which has the sense of 'to punish', to describe his action as well as the word *cien*; and they may also use the verb *be*, with the sense of sending for, or coming to fetch, or returning to get something.

An appreciation of two considerations arising from what Nuer 775
say about ghostly vengeance gives us a further understanding of 626
their ideas about the dead. The dead are thought to have the same feelings as when they were alive. They are resentful of injustice and bear malice to those who have wronged them. It stands to reason therefore—and this is the second consideration—that it is only those who have recently departed who avenge themselves on the living, for it is only they who can have been wronged by them. Nuer do not think of *cien* in connexion with ancestral ghosts but only in connexion with those who have recently become ghosts. It would appear that a man can still take vengeance even after he has been dispatched to the community of the ghosts by the mortuary rites, but a dead man seems to be most dangerous and his living kinsmen the most vulnerable the less the lapse of time after his death, and consequently in the period between death and the mortuary ceremonies. Those nearest to the dead are those who are most likely to be affected, for though a man can *cien*, just as he can *biit*, anyone who has done him an injury, what has been said of the *biit* can be said of the *cien*: the closer the relationship of the persons concerned the worse both the offence and its consequences. Curses and ghostly vengeance are thus two sides to the same idea and in general they have the same social incidence.

To stop the effects of *cien* it is necessary to make sacrifice to God [782]
and, where possible, reparation to the ghost for the wrong done to him. Sacrifice without reparation is of no avail. Nuer say that it may temporarily wipe out (*woc*) the *cien* from the body of the haunted man, but it will return if he does not make amends. Therefore, when he makes sacrifice he tells God 'I am sorry, I have erred; take thy cow and let the *cien* leave me.' Nuer say that God is to understand that such an expression of contrition implies the intention to make reparation, if this is possible.

CHAPTER VIII

SACRIFICE

I

WE have seen how Nuer regard Spirit and creature as things of different orders and standing conceptually in opposition, and that Spirit is always, though it may aid him, dangerous to man. It is in the light of these observations that the most typical and expressive act of Nuer religion, the turning to God in the rite of sacrifice, is to be viewed and understood. It is an enactment of their most fundamental religious conceptions. Nuer, as we have seen, cannot say, because they do not know, what God is, but we shall at least learn from their sacrifices more of what they conceive man's relationship to him to be. 782 ●

I speak here only of bloody sacrifice. I exclude from the discussion cereal and other offerings. People sometimes place heads of the first maize and millet in the thatch over the entrance to their byres as a thank-offering to God, though this is not obligatory. They also sometimes throw grain into streams as an offering to the spirit *buk*. I exclude also the casting away of lumps of tobacco, beads (especially a woman's offering), or some other small piece of property in minor troubles or anxieties, when there is a sudden danger for which immediate action has to be taken and there is no time for formalities, or when a man is in the bush and cannot lay his hands on a beast or even a cucumber. The suppliant asks God to take the offering and spare him. I exclude also the offering of beer or milk, poured in libation, often at the foot of a tethering-peg, probably a peg to which a beast dedicated to some spirit is tied, by a very poor person who cannot afford animal sacrifices. On the other hand, I include as coming within the sense of bloody sacrifice offerings of cucumbers, for they are consecrated and immolated as surrogates for oxen.

Nuer sacrifice on a great many occasions: when a man is sick, when sin has been committed, when a wife is barren, sometimes on the birth of a first child, at the birth of twins, at initiation of sons, at marriages, at funerals and mortuary ceremonies, after

782 homicides and at settlements of feuds, at periodic ceremonies in honour of one or other of their many spirits or of a dead father, before war, when persons or property are struck by lightning, when threatened or overcome by plague or famine, sometimes before large-scale fishing enterprises, when a ghost is troublesome, &c.

When we examine this variety of occasions we see that Nuer sacrifices fall into two broad classes. Most sacrifices are made to prevent some danger hanging over people, for example on account of some sin, to appease an angry spirit, or at the birth of twins; or to curtail or to get rid of a misfortune which has already fallen, as in times of plague or in acute sickness. On all such occasions Spirit intervenes, or may intervene, for better or more often for worse, in the affairs of men, and its intervention is always dangerous. Any misfortune or grave danger is a sign of spiritual activity. Such sacrifices are made for a person or persons and not for social groups and they involve ideas of propitiation, expiation, and related intentions. As they are the most common and the most specifically religious sacrifices I shall devote chief attention to them. There are other sacrifices which accompany various social activities, mostly of the *rites de passage* kind, such as initiation, marriage, and death. We cannot make an absolute distinction between the two sorts of sacrifice. A sacrifice of the *rites de passage* kind may contain elements of meaning characteristic of the other type. Sacrifices in marriage ceremonies—at betrothal, at the wedding, and at the consummation—are the best examples of the second type. A sacrifice to ward off the consequences of serious incest is a good example of the first type. A sacrifice to end mourning is an example of the blending of the two. It is a routine sacrifice in a *rites de passage* context, but it is also intended to get rid of the contamination of death and any evil there may be in men's hearts. For the purpose of discussing the meaning or meanings of sacrifice it is necessary to make the distinction, even if there is some overlapping. I shall speak of the one type as personal sacrifice and of the other as collective sacrifice. These terms draw attention to the formal distinction between sacrifices offered for persons and those offered on behalf of social groups, but we shall see that they differ also in intention, the first having primarily a piacular intention, and the second a confirmatory one; or, to use Hubert and Mauss's terms, the first are sacrifices of 'désacralization' (they make the sacred profane, they get rid of Spirit from man) and the second

16: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1956
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

PLATE VIII

782

Consecration

[facing p. 198]

782 are sacrifices of 'sacralization' (they make the profane sacred, they bring Spirit to man).[1]

This chapter is mostly devoted to a discussion of personal sacrifices but I say something of the collective ones before giving exclusive attention to them. The primary purpose of collective sacrifices, and also their main function, is to confirm, to establish, or to add strength to, a change in social status—boy to man, maiden to wife, living man to ghost—or a new relationship between social groups—the coming into being of a new age-set, the uniting of kin groups by ties of affinity, the ending of a blood-feud—by making God and the ghosts, who are directly concerned with the change taking place, witnesses of it. The ceremonies are incomplete and ineffective without sacrifice, but sacrifice may be only one incident in a complex of ceremonies, dances, and rites of various kinds, which have no religious significance in themselves. Its importance lies in the fact that it sacralizes the social event and the new relationships brought about by it. It solemnizes the change of status or relationship, giving it religious validation. On such occasions sacrifice has generally a conspicuously festal and eucharistic character.

Collective sacrifices thus have a marked structural character. Sacrifices may be made on behalf of whole communities, as in times of epidemic, but they are then made for a great number of individuals. Here, however, we are dealing with something rather different, with sacrifices made on behalf of social segments, lineages, and age-sets, which are concerned as whole groups, sometimes in relation to groups of like order. This is why they have to be performed by specially appointed representatives of the groups concerned or by public functionaries, as is explained later.

It is indicative of Nuer religious thought that these sacrifices performed as part of social activities are concerned with relations within the social order and not with relations between men and their natural environment. We are often told in accounts of African peoples that their sacrifices are concerned with weather, rain, fertility of the soil, seed-time, fructification, harvest, and fishing and hunting. Generally no rite of any kind is performed by Nuer in connexion with these processes, certainly no regular and obligatory rite; and if in certain circumstances one is performed,

---

[1] H. Hubert and M. Mauss, 'Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice', *L'Année sociologique*, vol. ii, 1899, pp. 89 seq.

782 as before large-scale fishing, it is rarely a sacrifice, and if it is a sacrifice it is not regarded as either necessary or important. All this may be due to some extent to lack of interest in agriculture and hunting, but it is also because Nuer take nature for granted and are passive and resigned towards it. They do not think that they can influence it to their own advantage, being merely ignorant folk. What happens there is the will of God, and that has to be accepted. Hence Nuer are little interested in ritual for bringing rain and even consider it presumptuous to think of asking God for rain before sowing. This mentality is illustrated in one of their stories which relates how death came to a girl who asked that the setting of the sun might be delayed till she had finished her work. Nuer rather turn their eyes inwards, to the little closed social world in which they live, they and their cattle. Their sacrifices are concerned with moral and spiritual, not natural, crises.

II

We have now first to ask to whom sacrifices are made. This brings us again up against the problem of the one and the many. When a sin is expiated or pollution is wiped out by sacrifice it is made to God alone. Likewise in major calamities, such as plagues and murrains. Also when a person is struck by lightning, in connexion with death, and in cases of sickness not attributed to a specific cause. We are here dealing with circumstances common to all men and with universals—with the moral law which is the same for all men, with effects of common interest and concern, and with dangers and misfortunes which fall on each and all alike. Sacrifices may, however, be made on some occasions to one or other spirit, for example, to a spirit of the air before battle or when it is thought to have brought about sickness in a man or if it is feared that it may do so; or to a totemic or other spirit of the below in circumstances already mentioned in earlier chapters. We are here dealing with something more particular and specific, the relation of certain persons to Spirit figured to them, and not to others, in one or other special form as a spirit. Nevertheless, as I have earlier explained, these spirits may be regarded as hypostases, representations, or refractions of God, and in the already defined sense in which this is so we can say that a sacrifice to any one of them is a sacrifice also to God. The cause of sickness, or of any misfortune, is always thought to be, either immediately or in the last resort, Spirit, which in some circumstances may be more specifically defined as a certain spirit. Furthermore, when sickness is attributed to an air-spirit, for example *deng*, whether the patient recovers or not is thought to rest with God, that is, with Spirit in the comprehensive sense which includes *deng* as one manifestation of it. The two representations may thus be separated in the mind in relation to cause and cure, but they are fused in the sacrificial act. If, therefore, it can be said that, in this sense, God is sacrificed to in all sacrifices, it must be added that in particular circumstances connected with particular persons or social groups Spirit conceived of in some lower form may be dominant. This inevitably affects to some extent the character of the rite. 782

Spirit conceived of as God does not seize people and make them sick as some air-spirits and earth-spirits may. They exact a special tribute which God does not demand, a payment for special protection and favour, and this can hardly fail to affect the meaning of the sacrificial act. We have to take this fact into consideration, and it complicates our problem. To avoid ambiguities and obscurities at this stage I shall take sacrifice to God as my model and describe that, and then state later what modifications and qualifications are required when sacrifice is made to a spirit.

In the case of collective sacrifices, which, for reasons already given in Chapter IV, may be to Spirit in some totemic or other refraction, the changes in social status and relations they serve to bring about involve the ghosts, who are usually little or not at all concerned in personal sacrifices. At collective sacrifices they may therefore be invoked together with God in some such formula as 'God, thou and the ghosts'. Since the matter has been discussed earlier I need only say here that the sacrifices are made to God, even on those occasions which most directly concern the dead. The ghosts must be summoned as witnesses and the matter must be explained to them because it concerns them, but they are only witnesses as the living are, and what is explained to them is explained to the living also. Even when sacrifice is made at a mortuary ceremony or when a man commemorates his dead father it cannot be said that the victim is sacrificed to the ghost. It is sacrificed for the dead man, but the life of the victim is given to God and not to the ghost.[1] Even when a ghost is troublesome and

---

[1] Dr. Lienhardt tells me that this is also the case for the Dinka; it is probably

782 sacrifice has to be made to pacify it the victim is consecrated to God and not to the ghost. It is to God that expiation for the wrong done to the ghost must be made. What is made to the ghost is reparation, where this is possible. It follows from all that has been said about the Nuer notion of faults, and it will be seen that it also follows from the whole character of the sacrificial act, that it is only to Spirit that sacrifice can be made.

Our second question is, What is sacrificed? The sacrificial animal *par excellence* is an ox, and in important social ceremonies, such as weddings and those held for settlement of feuds, the victim must be an ox. Oxen are also sacrificed in times of general calamity, sometimes when people are dangerously ill, and occasionally to spirits. A barren cow may take the place of an ox. Bulls are only sacrified in one of the rites closing a blood-feud, and occasionally, though only old beasts, in honour of a dead father. Except in these instances a male victim must be a neuter. If it is not, it is castrated before the rites begin. Fertile cows are only sacrificed at mortuary ceremonies, and then only for senior persons, as a tribute to their position in the community. It does not matter what is the colour of the victim, though in certain sacrifices there is a preference for beasts with certain markings.

However, Nuer have not large herds and could not afford to slaughter oxen on every occasion of sacrifice, so, except on such occasions as the slaughter of an ox is obligatory, they generally use wethers and castrated he-goats as surrogates. Female and stud beasts would not be used if young males were available. This means in practice that it is one of the flock that is sacrificed when there is sickness and on most other occasions, and a poor man may use one of these animals where a rich man might use an ox. The ritual procedure is the same whatever the animal may be. It is of no significance that oxen are speared through the heart while the other beasts generally have their throats cut with the spear.

The animal, whatever it may be—cow or ox or bull, ewe or wether, nanny-goat or castrated billy-goat—is spoken of in invocations and in any sacrificial context as '*yang*', 'cow'. This word, like our 'cow', denotes in ordinary usage any bovine animal of any age and of either sex or, when used more exclusively, a female and, still more exclusively, an adult female. When translating what

---

so for the Shilluk as well (C. G. and B. Z. Seligman, op. cit., pp. 97–98, where several authorities are cited).

●782 [137] incest a fruit of the sausage tree (*Kigelia aethiopica*) may be cut in half, though I am uncertain whether this constitutes a sacrifice *in sensu stricto*.

We have discussed to whom sacrifice is made and what is sacrificed. We have now to ask by whom it is made, and when and where. We have first to distinguish between the person (or social group) on whose behalf it is made, whom we may speak of as the sacrificer, though with some danger of misunderstanding, because he may not take an active part in the rite performed on his behalf, and those who act on his behalf, the actors in the drama.[1] There may be a number of these. Several people may take part in the consecration and several men may deliver invocations. One man may present the victim, another consecrate and make the invocation over it, and yet another slay it. Nevertheless, there are always one or more prime actors, those who make the consecrations and invocations, which, rather than the actual killing, constitute for Nuer the main acts in the series of rites making up a sacrifice; and we may therefore speak of anyone who, after consecrating the victim, makes an invocation over it as the officiant. There may be several of them. In certain sacrifices, particularly those of the collective kind, whoever else may invoke God, one or other particular functionary either must do so or it is thought highly desirable that he should do so. I discuss in Chapter XII the sacrificial roles of these various functionaries in Nuer society. Normally any senior man, usually the head of the family of the sacrificer, can officiate at personal sacrifices. He would generally be one of the sacrificer's paternal kinsmen but it would not matter if he were not. The sacrifice is to God and not to ghosts, and it therefore does not matter who officiates. A youth would not officiate if there were
[561] an older man present, but this is a matter of social convention only: there is no ritual bar to his acting. Women do not sacrifice.
[562] They may assist in the act of consecration with ashes and they may pray, but they do not make invocations or slay victims. Neither the sacrificer nor the officiant has to be in a state of ceremonial purity. This is an idea entirely unknown to Nuer.

It is obvious that in the collective sacrifices the rites must have to some extent a determined place in the whole social activities of

---

[1] Hubert and Mauss, op. cit., pp. 48 seq., make the distinction by using 'sacrifiant' and 'sacrificateur'. A word corresponding to 'sacrifiant' is not so easily formed in English.

16: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1956
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

which they form a part, though Nuer are not usually particular 782 about the exact moment of their execution. For example, an ox must be sacrificed at a betrothal ceremony and it is usually slaughtered towards the end of the dancing in the evening, but it does not matter if it is sacrificed on the following morning instead. Personal sacrifice may be made at any time if a sudden crisis arises. If it is not acute, people may delay sacrifice till they have discovered its cause with the aid of a prophet or diviner if they suspect that it may be due to something particular, perhaps some sin or the anger of some spirit or ghost. The intention of the offering can then be more precisely formulated. But if the crisis is acute, sacrifice would, whatever opinion, if any, might be held about its cause, be made at once to God. Mgr. Mlakic was clearly recording what he witnessed or heard at the time it happened from a witness when he described how when lightning set fire to a byre its owner entered its flaming interior to save his family and cattle. His first act, however, was to spear a beast of the herd, saying 'God, what do you do to us?' Then he gave his attention to saving people and beasts.[1]

If there is no urgency a sacrifice may be put off till a time convenient for the sacrificer. The collective sacrifices and sacrifices in honour of spirits of one kind or another are normally held in the villages during the rains, and even in cases of sickness, if it is not acute, in dry-season camps Nuer prefer to put off animal sacrifice till they return to their villages. They may consider that though a sickness is due to neglect of some spirit there is no pressing need for immediate sacrifice. To keep the spirit content in the meantime they may sacrifice a cucumber, if they have one, or offer it some tobacco or a libation; or they may make an animal sacrifice in intention by devoting to the spirit then and there an animal by rubbing ashes on its back and then wait till they are back in their permanent homes to sacrifice it. Consequently one rarely sees animal sacrifices in dry-season camps.

A sacrifice is also a feast, and a feast is more suitably held in the 782 surroundings of huts and byres. Nuer, especially the older people, 574 think of the *cieng*, the homestead and village, rather than of the *wec*, the cattle camp, as their home. This is all the more weighty a reason in the case of collective sacrifices, because the kin who should attend them and have rights in the sacrificial flesh may be

---

[1] Op. cit.

782 scattered in the drought. There is also plenty of beer and porridge
574 in the rains to add to the meat of the sacrifices for feasting, and little or none in the dry-season camps, for even if their millet is not exhausted people are often too far from their granaries to transport it. Moreover, the social activities which are the occasion of collective sacrifices take place, largely because there is plenty of food, in the rains. I think also it is possible that there is more, and more serious, sickness in the rains and hence the greater need for sacrifices then.

782 It does not seem usually to matter at what time of day a sacrifice takes place, though the early morning is preferred on big occasions when oxen are sacrificed; but I have witnessed sacrifices when the sun was high and also in the evening. Early morning and evening are the most convenient times because then the men are at leisure and it is cool, but the early morning has the additional advantage that it gives time for what are sometimes lengthy ceremonies to be performed with slow dignity. I suppose that if there were need Nuer would sacrifice at night, but I have never known this happen, and it would cause certain inconveniences.

There is no particular spot at which the rites must be performed. The ceremony may be held in the space in front of the dwelling-
[778] huts if it is on a domestic scale. This is a suitable place for sacrifice, for a man often erects there a *riek*, post-shrine, and there also is the wife's *buor*, mud wind-screen (Plate V), which also has a certain sacred significance, being the woman's counterpart to the *riek*, as well as serving its practical purpose. But in major sacrifices of the collective type, when there may be many persons present, the sacrifices are likely to be held in the kraal, where there may also be a *riek* (Plate VI), or at its edge, on account of the cattle, or even if they are absent, to avoid the tethering-pegs incommoding those making the invocations. It is not, however, a matter of importance and anywhere convenient will do—properly speaking Nuer have no fanes.[1] It is the same for place as for time. They do not worry about such details. God is at all times and everywhere; there are no specially sacred times and places for sacrifice. Likewise, there are no specially sacred persons who must make sacrifice: any man

---

[1] God, spirits, and ghosts are associated with the *riek*, which may be in the courtyard, in the kraal, or at the side of the *gol*, the central hearth in the byre, which is the symbol of the family conceived of as a group of agnates and hence of the lineage; and for women, with the *buor*, the symbol of the elementary family, the domestic group.

can offer sacrifice on behalf of himself or others, intermediaries are not required. 782 ●

782 781 Before giving an account of the succession of acts which constitute a sacrifice it is advisable to say further that though the acts are almost always the same and performed in the same order they are much more elaborate on some occasions than on others. A mortuary ceremony must begin between dawn and sunrise and is carried out by long, slow, solemn stages. The rites of sacrifice at marriage ceremonies are, on the contrary, often carried out in a perfunctory manner, giving the impression that they are regarded as little more than a formality. Likewise there is much variation in the attention paid to the rites by those present but not taking an active part in them. In some sacrifices they pay little attention to them, or even ignore them altogether, continuing their dancing or talking among themselves about their own affairs. Thus, in my experience, at sacrifices in marriage ceremonies only close kin of the persons immediately concerned take much, or even any, interest in the ritual. Even sacrifices in honour of a spirit may be performed in a perfunctory manner, it being thought that all that is required is that a beast be offered so that the spirit may know that it has not been forgotten. But on occasions of serious sickness, of grave danger, and of death the spectators sit quietly in a line or semicircle and give silent attention to what is being said and done. The amount of attention paid and its intensity depend on the nature of the occasion and the degree to which spectators are personally involved.

782 781 121 Therefore the many attempts that have been made to explain primitive religions in terms of supposed psychological states—awe, religious thrill, and so forth—are, as far as the Nuer are concerned, inept because the feelings of officiants and spectators are, in so far as they are discernible, clearly different on different occasions and in different parts of the same ceremony. This is obvious to anyone who sees a few Nuer sacrifices. Some people are paying attention and others not. Some are solemn, others gay. Wedding and funeral sacrifices do not evoke the same response, nor do initiation and incest sacrifices, nor even the opening and closing sacrifices of a mortuary ceremony. The feelings of close kin are not the same as those of distant kin. There is no need to labour the point. What is important in sacrifice is not how people feel, or even how they behave—a serious mien when the occasion is a solemn one is a

782 matter of sentiment and good manners, not of religion. What is
781 important is that the essential acts of sacrifice be carried out and,
121 especially in personal sacrifices, with a right intention, which is
a matter of disposition, not of emotion.

III

792 Almost all sacrifices, whether personal or collective, have the same general features. A description of one is therefore, apart from details, a description of almost all. The victim is brought to the place of sacrifice and there are performed in succession the four acts which compose the sacrificial drama: presentation, consecration, invocation, and immolation. Other features may be added, such as libations and aspersions and, mostly in sacrifices to spirits, hymn-singing, but these are supernumerary acts. The essential rites of the sacrifice proper are the four I have mentioned. They form what might be called the canon of sacrifice.

The first act is the *pwot*, the driving into the ground of a tethering-peg and the tethering of the animal to it. The officiant presents the victim to God. The man who stakes the victim is called *pwot yang*, the tetherer of the cow, and as in collective sacrifices this is generally done by the master of ceremonies of the family concerned he is commonly referred to in a sacrificial context by this title. Sometimes, after the victim has been staked, a libation, of milk, beer, or water, is poured over, or at the foot of, the peg.

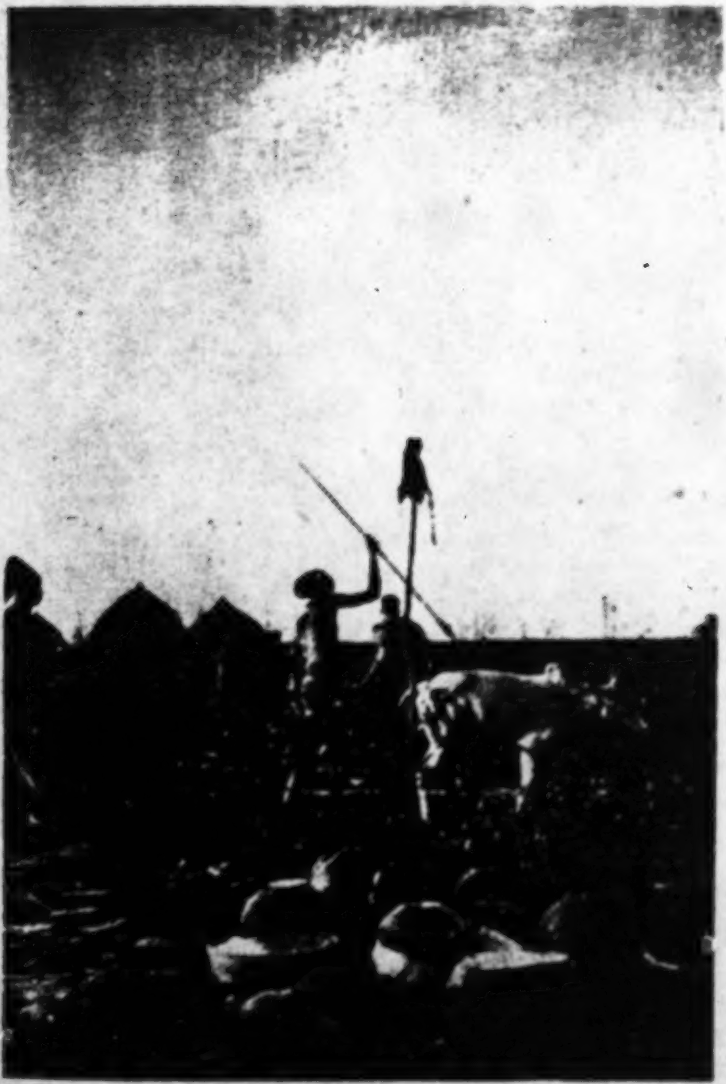
Then takes place the *buk*, the rubbing (with ashes), the act of consecration (Plate VIII). The man who is about to speak the first invocation rubs ashes of cattle-dung lightly on the victim's back with his right hand. Each speaker does this in turn, and in some sacrifices all present place ash on the victim's back whether they make invocations or not. I discuss later (pp. 261–2 and 279–81) the meaning of rubbing ashes, when I shall try to show that it is not only a consecration of the beast to God but also an identification of man with ox.

Then takes place the *lam*, the invocation (Plate IX). The officiant, holding his spear in his right hand, speaks to God over the consecrated victim. The invocation states the intention of the sacrifice and matters relevant to it. Occasionally, when a sacrifice is a very perfunctory affair, no words are spoken. When asked about the omission Nuer say that the sacrifice is the *lam*, by which they

16: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1956
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

PLATE IX

782



Invocation

[facing p. 208]

782 mean that the intention is implied in the sacrifice itself in the circumstances in which it is made. However, even in the most perfunctory rites, it is more usual for a few formal phrases to be spoken by the officiant as he consecrates the victim, either in a scarcely audible patter or even silently. He is addressing God and not the people present. This is what Nuer call a *lam me tot*, a short invocation. They say '*ca be lam ɛ bec*', 'they will not invoke (God) much'. Normally, however, and always in a serious situation which also permits leisurely action, there is a *lam me dit*, a long invocation. The officiant walks up and down past the tethered beast, brandishing his spear, and uttering his words loud and clear —he is then addressing the audience as well as God, and they may interrupt him with promptings, advice, and even argument. In a long address of this kind certain petitionary formulae recur again and again but it has no set form or prescribed words. Each speaker may say what he likes so long as what he says is true and also in some way relevant to the intention of the sacrifice. These long rambling addresses, sometimes taking over an hour to deliver, contain, besides a statement of intention and petitions, all sorts of affirmations, exhortations, reflections about life, anecdotes, and opinions; and also complaints, for on very formal occasions the speaker must reveal any grievance he may have in his heart. As there may be several such invocations by different persons before the victim is slain, a sacrifice may be a very lengthy affair, and for a European rather tedious to assist at. He has to sit in the sun for several hours listening to addresses which are difficult for him to follow. Some of the sentences may be inaudible, the speaker speaking too low or having his back turned to the audience, who may also be talking among themselves; and the invocations are apt to require a more detailed knowledge of past events and relationships than a stranger is likely to have. These difficulties are added to by a marked tendency in the invocations towards periphrasis and aposiopesis.

782
196 The word *lam*, which has much the same range of meaning in other Nilotic languages, expresses a number of interconnected ideas, one or other of which is stressed according to the direction of interest. In reference to God it has to be translated 'to invoke'. In reference to a sacrificial victim it can be translated 'to sacrifice'. With reference to a man the ordinary meaning is 'to curse', more rarely 'to bless'. It may also refer to a formal pronouncement in

782
196

ordeals, and in animal stories to the ordeal itself. 'Invocation' would seem best to cover all these special senses. For the verbal form I shall generally use the phrase 'to make an invocation'. Nuer usually employ it in what we call a passive or intransitive mood when speaking of sacrifices, saying '*ba lam*', 'an invocation is made', or '*be lam ke lam*', 'he will invocate with an invocation'; but since it is understood that it is God (though it may be in some refraction and sometimes coupled with ghosts) who is invoked it is legitimate also to use the phrase 'to invoke God' even when this is not a word-for-word translation of what is said in Nuer.[1] Even in curses and blessings it is God who is implicitly, if not explicitly, invoked, since the desired action can come only from him. A curse is therefore an imprecatory, and a blessing a benedictory, address to God.

The full significance of the *lam* will emerge later when the symbolism of the spear and the role of the ox have been discussed. Here I define only its outward character as a ritual form of speech. The word indicates a distinctive form of address rather than its content, which varies according to circumstances. We can perhaps best grasp its distinctive character by contrasting invocation (*lam*) with prayer (*pal*). *Pal* is to make a simple and direct petition to God for some favour, usually of a general nature, such as the petitions I recorded in Chapter I; and the supplication is so often spoken with a pleading of the hands that the word implies this gesture—*be tet pal*, praying with the hands, being understood. The word may also be used to refer to congregational hymn-singing to spirits, though since this is frequently done to the accompaniment of hand-clapping the word *pat*, to clap, is often used instead. The form and character of the *lam* are different. Its characteristic accompanying gesture is brandishing a spear, and although it contains petitions (*lang kwoth*) which are the same as those uttered in praying these are not its main or typical feature. The invocation has an incisiveness prayer lacks. What is said in it is more definite and particular; and its clauses are mostly affirmations, formal statements, rather than petitions, and these affirmations, declarations of what is, have a sort of virtue in themselves.

---

[1] The difficulty is that the verb 'invoke', unlike the now rarely used 'invocate', cannot be used intransitively in English as the verb *lam* can be used in Nuer. However, the grammatical distinctions we make between transitive and intransitive and between passive and active do not entirely suit the Nuer language.

I do no mean by this that an invocation is a spell—far from it— 782
but there is a difference between an assertion and a supplication. 196
Thus in a sacrifice for sickness what is said is not so much may the sick man be healed as that his sickness is of no account and that he will be healed in the moment of sacrifice. Intention and what is intended are brought together. The sickness is finished, it is blown away, it is no more. And here we have again to emphasize the significance of the identification of sickness with sin. If the sacrifice wipes out the sin it wipes out also the material form in which it is manifested and known. That this emphasis is required is confirmed by a letter I have received from Dr. Mary Smith in which she tells me that the Nuer at her mission do not use the word *lam* if they are speaking of praising or giving thanks but only, and always, where sin is involved. But the validity of the assertion that the evil is no more depends on the general validity of all else that is said. Nuer say that a man must make invocation in truth (*thuogh*). Even in recounting the most trivial details in a history of events which have led up to a situation in which sacrifice is necessary every statement made in the presence of God must be true; and I think this, rather than just a desire to interrupt or dispute, accounts for the emendations, additions, and contradictions of the assistants. The victim offered to God has placed on its back by the *lam* what is said in the *lam*, and if the sacrifice is to be efficacious what is said must be true.

Now takes place the immolation, what Nuer generally call the 782
kam yang, the giving, or offering, of the victim when speaking of personal sacrifices, and the *nak*, the killing, when speaking of collective sacrifices. By the use of one or the other word they indicate whether a sacrifice is for them more a religious or a festal event, whether its purpose is mainly piacular or social. Nuer do not, in so far as I have observed or heard, wait for the animal to urinate before killing it, as do some of the other Nilotic peoples. An ox is speared on the right side, and so expert are the Nuer that I have never known a second thrust to be necessary or the beast to move for more than a few seconds after the thrust has been made. Sheep and goats have their throats cut (Plate X). A bovine victim should fall well to make a perfect sacrifice. Falling well means falling cleanly on its side, preferably on its right side, and with its head in the desired direction, which in most sacrifices is towards the huts and the people who sit outside them. I have been told that

782 should an ox fall badly, and there is another handy, they repeat the sacrifice. I have not, however, seen this done, and in my experience those present say that the animal has fallen well whichever way it falls. I have also been told that a lion will not eat an animal it has killed if it falls on its left side, but most Nuer ridiculed this statement.

We may, indeed, note here that Nuer are not a highly ritualistic people. We have already noted that they are not particular about the time and place of sacrifice or who performs the rite, that *neither sacrificer nor officiant has to submit to any ceremonial* interdictions, and that there is no prescribed content of their invocations, neglect of which would invalidate the rite. There is a certain air of casualness and lack of ceremony about the whole sacrificial procedure. So, although it is better if the ox falls well, it does not much matter if it does not. Nuer are more interested in purpose than in details of procedure. An oblation must be made to validate a social status or relationship or so that people may be free from evil and danger—small details of ceremony do not matter.

Sacrifice proper finishes with the *kam yang* or *nak*, the offering or killing of the victim, and since these expressions describe the culminating movement of the drama they can stand for the whole sacrifice and have the general sense of 'to sacrifice'. In this final moment, at which the invocation may be intensified (Plate XI), the consecrated life has gone to God.

Nuer say that God takes the *yiegh*, the life, and I have heard them say also that he takes the *tie*, the soul. This raises a problem touched on earlier (p. 157). They also say that what in sacrifice belongs to God are the *riem*, blood, which soaks into the ground, and the *wau*, chyme or perhaps a mixture of chyme and chyle. In what sense do Nuer speak of the blood and the chyme being what God receives? No doubt we have here to take into consideration the different levels at which Nuer conceive of Spirit. I have heard them say that after sacrifice to a spirit you can see the flesh of the speared beast twitching as the spirit pulls at it, and we have earlier noted in the hymn to the river-spirit *buk* the emphasis on red blood and also how the fetishes are said to 'eat' the 'soul' of offerings. But, as I have said before, the word *cam*, to eat, even in reference to fetishes is a metaphorical usage. I think that it may be accepted that there is no question of Nuer believing that in animal

sacrifice Spirit, even as most materially conceived of, eats the 782
blood and the chyme, not even in the sense of consuming their essence. Clearly, they are not materially consumed. Nuer do not say that Spirit feeds on (*mieth*) or eats (*cam*) or drinks (*madh*, *ruidh*) them. They do not use these words, but say that God, or a spirit, *kan*, takes, them. It is not a question of eating anything—what eating there is is done by the people—but of taking something, the life. This would seem to be a matter of great importance in an estimation of Nuer religious thought.

When, therefore, Nuer say that the blood and the chyme belong 782
to God we are to understand, I would suggest, that this is a way 761
of saying that the life belongs to him. It is true that we cannot say for the Nuer, as for the Hebrews, that the blood is the life. The word for life, *yiegh*, is also the word for breath, so that if we were to say that anything 'is' the life we would have to say it of the breath; though even here the word 'is' must not be taken to imply identity but a symbolic relationship. We must rather suppose that the blood and the chyme, and especially the blood, are also symbols of the life.

Human blood has for the Nuer a peculiar psychical value. When 782
kinsmen and neighbours fight they use clubs instead of spears. No [578]
doubt this convention is most easily explained as making homicide 826
a less likely outcome than if spears were permitted and, should it happen that a man be killed, of making a settlement easier to bring about on the grounds of absence of intent; but there may be a different, or at any rate an additional, reason for it. It may be that behind it is the notion that not the same responsibility is felt if the life-blood does not flow as it would from a fatal spear wound—that in a sense the man has not taken the life, that the death happened of itself, as Nuer would put it. That Nuer have some such idea is shown by the fact that a ghoul may be killed with impunity, but only if he is beaten to death with clubs and his blood is not shed. The blood of a man slain with the spear is moreover thought to enter in some way into the slayer, and he must therefore at once have his arm cut by a leopard-skin priest to let it out. This must mean that blood is thought to have some vitality of its own. The rite of initiation must be held in a homestead because the blood of the initiates must not be shed outside the home, and care is taken to bury it in the holes into which it flows lest dogs eat it. These examples, and others could be cited,

782 826 show that human blood has mysterious properties but they do not justify our saying that Nuer regard the life as something contained in the blood. Moreover, in the case of cattle, which is the case at issue, we have to bear in mind that Nuer have no objection to shedding their blood. They do so when they cut their horns, when they castrate them, and when they pierce veins in the necks of cows (*bar*) in the dry season for veterinary purposes or, more usually, to obtain blood for boiling or roasting for their own consumption. But if the blood is not thought of literally as containing the life, the life of a sacrificed ox ebbs with its flow so that Nuer say either that God takes the life (or breath) or that he takes the blood—the blood and the breath being symbols of the life, as also appears to be, in a lesser degree, the chyme.

782 The chyme (*wau*) is what makes the flesh and maintains the life of the beast. Dr. Lienhardt tells me that *wei*, the word for it in Dinka, means in that language also 'life' and 'breath'. It does not appear to have so important a place in Nuer ritual as it has in the ritual of some other Nilotic peoples. The only reference in my notes to its sacramental use in connexion with sacrifice is to its being smeared on a Dinka at his adoption into a Nuer lineage, but Father Crazzolara says that sometimes after sacrifice the head of the family takes some of the chyme and after adding some of the beast's blood and his own spittle he rubs this mixture on his own breast, back of neck, and maybe also forehead, and perhaps also on the same parts of members of his family.[1]

782 574 God takes the *yiegh*, the life. Man takes the *ring*, the flesh, what is left over after the sacrifice. The carcass is cut up and skinned as soon as the animal falls. In most sacrifices the meat is consumed by members of the family and kin of the person on whose behalf it was made. In marriage and most other collective sacrifices it is divided among relatives, both paternal and maternal, in traditional portions; and the age-mates of the owner of the beast and representatives of lineages collateral to his may also have rights to shares. If the principal officiant is not a member of the family or of the close kin but a master of ceremonies of the family or a priest or a prophet, he also receives his share. This part of the proceed-

---

[1] Op. cit., p. 80. Among the Shilluk, at any rate in their sacrifices to end feuds, the chyme of the victim is put on the youths to indicate unity. A beast eats a bit here and a bit there: in the stomach it becomes one (D. S. Oyler, 'The Shilluk Peace Ceremony', *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1920, p. 299).

782 574 ings is of general interest and not merely for those directly concerned in the rites. If it is at all a public occasion people, whether they are concerned in the matter or not, gather round to watch the meat being cut up and handed to those to whom it is due, and there is often much shouting and argument as the distribution is goodhumouredly disputed and men tug at the carcass and snatch or beg pieces of meat. Even outsiders who get in the way and beg persistently enough are likely to receive pieces of it. According to the circumstances those who on such an occasion receive meat take it to their homes, maybe in different villages, for cooking and eating, or it is cooked by women of the homestead in which the sacrifice took place and eaten there by groups, according to sex, age, and kinship. The meat is cooked, served, and eaten as would be that of a wild beast slaughtered in hunting. It is boiled, though tit-bits may be roasted in the embers of a fire. I want to make it clear indeed that the cutting up of the victim, the preparation of its flesh, and the eating of it are not parts of the sacrifice. To regard the eating of the animal as part of the sacrificial rite would be like regarding a wedding feast as part of the marriage service in our own country. But if it does not form part of the rite and has no sacramental significance it forms part of the whole ceremony in the broader sense and has a social significance. We have always to remember that a sacrifice, even piacular sacrifice, furnishes a feast and that in the circumstances in which Nuer live and by convention this means that neighbours are likely in one way or another to share in it.

IV

782 The ordinary Nuer sacrifice is carried out in the manner I have described—*pwot, buk, lam, nak* (*kam yang*), presentation, consecration, invocation, immolation. In some sacrifices, however, there are differences of order and procedure.

782 765 Mortuary ceremonies open with the slaughter of one or more beasts before sunrise, and as the invocations do not take place till later in the day they are not spoken over the victims as in other sacrifices. I do not think that this reversal of phases has in itself any special significance. Since the cattle have to be killed before the sun rises it is convenient to postpone the invocations, which are very lengthy on this occasion. Moreover, though in the mortuary

782 ceremony which I witnessed the speakers of the invocations did not
765 as they spoke walk up and down past tethered victims, as in normal sacrifices, they walked up and down past the dead man's possessions to which had been added the heads and hides of the slaughtered beasts; and I believe this to be the usual practice. As these heads and hides represented the victims it may be said that the invocations were said over them *post mortem*. What is of significance is rather the fact that the cattle must be slaughtered before the sun rises. The sacrifices concern death and the ghost of a dead man, so that the killing before sunrise is in accord with the association of east and light with life and of west and darkness with death. This part of the ceremony is for the dead man. The sacrifices are for him. Another sacrifice, which concludes the ceremonies, is for the release of the living. This explains also another difference, one of procedure.

It is understandable that on this occasion there is no formal presentation, for the beasts are killed at their habitual tethering-pegs in the kraal; but that there is also no consecration with ashes calls for comment. The explanation I would put forward, and which I discuss further in later chapters, is that the rubbing with ashes is, besides a consecration, an identification, at any rate in sacrifice which has a piacular meaning, of life of man with life of ox. Here sacrifice is for the dead. His soul, as we have seen earlier, goes to the abode of the ghosts with the souls of the cattle slaughtered at his mortuary ceremony. It is not for the living, so the living do not identify themselves with the victim in the usual manner.

There are some peculiar features in other sacrifices, apart from the supernumerary acts, such as libations, I have mentioned as sometimes accompanying the main rites, but they are only variations in the mode of slaughter or special acts performed after the sacrifice has been made.

782 In sacrifices in which the idea of separation is strong, as in cases of incest, to sever kinship, and in one of the mortuary rites, instead of the ox being speared and then skinned it is thrown on the ground and cut longitudinally in half, an operation known as *bak*. They begin the cutting by making an incision in the throat, so that the animal is soon dead, and they then cut towards the tail, slitting even that in two. Finally, they split the head in two with an axe. In other sacrifices in which the same idea is present the animal is speared, or its throat is slit, but instead of being skinned

it is cut in two laterally across the belly (*ngok*). This is done at 782
ceremonies in honour of a *colwic* spirit, and also in rites performed to avoid misfortune coming to a man whose wife has been unfaithful or who takes a widow in leviratic marriage.

In sacrifices to spirits associated with rivers and streams and with creatures which live in them (generally the crocodile), and also sometimes in a sacrifice to God for rain, the victim—a sheep or goat, not an ox—may be bound and pushed under the water among the reeds and weeds. When sacrifice is made to the python-spirit the victim is suffocated. The openings of its body are stuffed with grass and it is jumped on and pummelled to death. In practice it is assumed to be dead at an early stage and the point of a spear is inserted in its throat to begin the skinning. Nuer regard [177]
this as a Dinka mode of sacrifice, as indeed it is, contrasting suffocation with *yiedh*, stabbing with the spear, their own normal mode of sacrificing oxen.

I have not seen a sacrifice to the python-spirit, but I have seen an ox suffocated in a different and rare ceremony. I think that perhaps what I witnessed should not be regarded as a sacrifice at all, at any rate in the usual sense, for the beast does not seem to have been consecrated and there was no invocation. It has more the appearance of what we might better describe as a magical rite, almost certainly of Dinka origin. I feel nevertheless that, as it was the only occasion I saw a killing by suffocation, I should give a brief description of it. When a girl is espoused early in life, probably [842]
before the commencement of the menses, the premature payment of bridewealth may cause her to be barren unless a special ceremony is performed. In western Nuerland, where I saw it, it is called *gorot*.[1] I believe that in eastern Nuerland a rather different ceremony is performed. On the occasion when I was present it took place in the girl's home after her marriage had been consummated. An ox was thrown and its forelegs and back legs tied in pairs. It was then slowly suffocated, grass being first pushed up its anus with a stick, and then into its mouth and nostrils (Plate III). During its sufferings the husband and a youth of his age-set, the wife and a maiden of about her age, and a small boy and a small

---

[1] J. Kiggen (op. cit., pp. 108 and 117) gives this word as the name of a different ceremony, for a woman without children who has smallpox. He says that a small gourd is opened, beer is poured into it, it is rubbed over the woman, and a goat is killed. The rite I describe is probably his *guur*, the meaning of which he gives as 'animal sacrifice to the Dinka god'.

782 girl sat on its flank. After a while they rose and the ox's throat was cut. Dr. Lienhardt tells me that this mode of slaughter by cutting the throat, otherwise unknown among the Nuer in the killing of oxen, is the usual manner of sacrificing oxen among the Dinka. The ox was then cut up and from each joint and major organ a bit of meat was sliced off. The bits were cooked and then minced. The conductor of the rite, a female diviner, threw some of the mincemeat towards the hut where the husband and wife were cohabiting and placed some of it in the mouths of the spouses. Both spat it out. The husband told me afterwards that the putting of the meat into his mouth was the most humiliating part of the rite because he had never before allowed food to touch his lips in the presence of his wife. The small boy was then seated on the husband's lap and the small girl on the wife's lap. A gourdful of the mincemeat was emptied into the husband's cupped hands and he transferred it to the cupped hands of the boy. The action was repeated by the wife and the small girl. A pot of boiled blood was then taken into the hut and the diviner scraped some of it with a mussel shell across the mouths of husband and wife and the companions of their own age. The door of the hut was then closed and the butter was placed on the fire. While it was melting, a boy, the wife's brother, circled the hut outside with the boiled hump of the ox on the point of a fishing-spear. When he stuck the hump through the first window of the hut the diviner asked 'what will you give me?' and someone in the hut answered that she would give a brown calf. The action was repeated at the other windows of the hut, the answer referring to either a brown or a black calf. Then the door was opened and the diviner hung round the wife's neck the stomach lining of the ox and the skin of its umbilicus to which brass rings and part of its tail had been attached. She then anointed husband and wife and their companions and others present with the butter. On their departure the husband's people took the meat of the ox home with them, except the head, which remained with the wife's people who had provided the ox. I was told that the purpose of the ceremony was to ensure that in spite of the unusual circumstances of betrothal a child would speedily be born to the union.

I cannot explain the symbolism, if it has any, of this particular rite, but in cases of sacrifice proper in which a victim is slain in an unusual manner the symbolism is manifest. The beast is cut in

PLATE X

782

Immolation

[facing p. 218]

twain to sever a relationship. The beast is drowned because the sacrifice is associated in one way or another with water. The beast is suffocated because that is how the python kills its prey. All this is mimicry, symbolic action by which some peculiar feature or some particular purpose of the sacrifice is expressed. The different modes of slaughter do not constitute different kinds of sacrifice but merely variations of the rite.

There are also variations in the manner of disposal of the carcass. In sacrifices in settlements of feuds the sacrificial ox is not skinned and its flesh then distributed in fixed traditional portions, but as soon as it falls all the men fall upon it and hack it to pieces with their spears, each taking what he can slice off and get away with. This is called *koak*. A scene of great confusion results and those taking part in the scrimmage are lucky if they are not injured by the spears used to cut off pieces of the flesh. An animal found dead in the bush is treated in the same way; and according to Father Crazzolara also cattle burnt in a byre struck by lightning.[1] Dr. Howell says that when an elephant is killed by hunters it is hacked to pieces in the same manner: 'the chaos which follows has to be seen to be believed'.[2] Occasionally sacrifices are holocausts, as when sacrifice is made to God to stay a plague or murrain, or to the durra-bird-spirit for the birds to leave the millet and return to the bush. The victim is left lying where it falls and its flesh is not eaten. I believe that it is the same with an ox sacrificed before an advancing enemy. In these instances the victims are slain in the bush and not, as in ordinary sacrifices, in the homestead.

These variations in the disposal of the carcass would seem to be connected with special circumstances in which sacrifice is sometimes made. We have a clue to the general scramble for meat at sacrifice to conclude a feud in the other occasions when a scramble is customary. Then the animal does not belong to anyone. An elephant's tusks belong to the first and second spearer but its flesh is the right of all who participate in the hunt. There are no individual rights in it. Likewise a beast found dead in the bush was a wild creature that belonged to no one and it did not die as a result of anyone's efforts. Similarly cattle burnt to death in a byre, although they belonged to the owner of the byre, were not slaugh-

---

[1] Op. cit., pp. 96–97.

[2] P. P. Howell, 'A Note on Elephants and Elephant Hunting among the Nuer', *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1945, p. 100.

•782 tered by him but by God, and when God took them they ceased to be his. It would seem likely therefore that some such idea of the beast belonging to no one is present in the sacrifice to end a feud. The holocaust appears to be, at any rate usually, a manner of disposal, like the burnt offering of the Hebrews, when sacrifice is made on behalf of the whole community against a common danger, plagues and murrains and an enemy. Here sacrifice is not made to serve any individual interest nor the exclusive interests of particular lineages or clans but the interests of all the people alike. The reason for abandoning the carcasses, however, seems to be the idea that the evil has entered them through the sacrificial act.

It remains only to mention briefly some other peculiar features of ritual attached to some sacrifices. A small piece of the hide of a victim may after any sacrifice be tied to the *riek* shrine as a memento, but after sacrifice to a spirit a more elaborate memorial, a *yik*, may be constructed. This is a small mound of ash and mud with a *riek* set in the middle of it. The bones, or some of them, of the victim may be buried in the mound. [783] In sacrifices for incest and in settlement of feuds the gall of the victim is drunk in infusion. This has nothing to do with the sacrifice itself but is a post-sacrificial act to cleanse the bodies of those who have been contaminated or to protect those who run a risk of contamination. It is a sort of medicine to counteract physically the consequences of the breach, or the possible breach, of an interdiction. It is something extra added to the sacramental action of the sacrifice proper. Some sacrifices are accompanied by the rite of aspersion. I discuss this later.

V

I have given some account of the structure of the Nuer sacrificial rite which, allowing for the variations and peculiar features I have mentioned, is the same for all sacrifices, those of the collective type as well as those of the personal type. Most sacrifices, as we have already noted, have a markedly piacular purpose. They are made in times of trouble and their general object is always the same, to get rid of the evil or threatening evil by offering to God a victim whose death will take it away. Nuer express this in various ways. They say that the evil 'will be finished with a thing (*duor*)'—that is, with an oblation. They say that it 'goes into the earth with the blood of the cow'. They say that 'the cow shields (*gang*)' the persons threatened by it. They say that God 'turns away'—as we have seen that in a sense the evil is he, in a certain aspect of the relation of Spirit to man, so, in this sense, it is he who is 'finished with a thing', he who 'goes into the earth' with the blood, he against whom the ox 'shields' man. 782

But though sacrifices made in times of trouble have this basic piacular meaning in common, certain tones in it are emphasized more in some sacrifices than in others, and this is sometimes indicated by some special word being used in reference to the intention. These words lie within the circuit of the general term denoting a piacular offering, *kam*, to give. An examination of them will shed further light on the character of the whole class of piacular sacrifices, and hence on the meaning of sacrifice in general. I speak now only of personal sacrifices, those which have a piacular intention.

When the notion of redemption is strongly marked the word 782 *kuk*, with the verbal form *kok*, seems generally to be used when 789 speaking of the sacrifice and in the invocation made at it. A *kuk kwoth*, sacrifice to God (or to some spirit), appears to be regarded as a ransom which redeems the person who pays it from a misfortune that would, or might, otherwise fall on him. By accepting the gift God enters into a covenant to protect the giver of it or help him in some other way. Through the sacrifice man makes a kind of bargain with his God.

In violent storms Nuer, fearful of the lightning, throw small pieces of tobacco into the air, asking God to take them, and saying that they have paid him ransom with this offering. When a man in sudden illness or danger takes off a bead or bracelet and throws it away he says 'grandfather [God], take thy cow [bead or bracelet], I have paid thee ransom (*kok*), let my sickness depart'. When an ox is sacrificed there is the idea that the evil goes into the ox and then into the earth with its blood, and there seems to be here the idea of its going into the bead and residing there; for I was once about to pick up a bead I saw lying on the ground in the bush when a Nuer stopped me, saying that it had probably been given to God as an offering by a sick man and if I took it the sickness might enter into me. Likewise, when Nuer sacrifice before crossing a river or wading into a lake to fish, and ask for the protection of the female spirit *buk* against the dangers of the water, they say 'take thy cow, we are ransomed (*kok*)'. In a story of how a girl, Nyanding, was sacrificed to the river which bears her name she

789 is said to have been paid in ransom to the river. The river was
782 bought, as it were, by her sacrifice; just as the hippopotamus had
[538] to buy the river in one of the Nuer just-so stories. Fox had found hippopotamus on land, where he had been created, and exacted from him, in payment for taking him to a river, the flesh around his mouth—which accounts for his funny face today. When they arrived at the river hippopotamus had to pay it (*kok*) the marrow of his leg bones before it would receive him—which accounts for their having no marrow, so Nuer say, in them today. 'Bought' and 'buy' are renderings I discuss below.

782 When in serious sickness an animal is sacrificed Nuer may say
755 *'ca kwoth kok ke yang'*, 'God is paid a cow [in ransom]'. I was present when a Nuer was defending himself against silent disapproval on the part of his family and kinsmen of his frequent sacrifices. He had been given to understand that it was felt that he was destroying the herd from inordinate love of meat. He said that this was not true. The oxen he had killed—and he had killed his own favourite ox among them—had been sacrificed to his mother-in-law's and wife's spirit *deng*, which came from Dinkaland and was frequently troubling his children and his wife and her brother with sickness. It was all very well for his family to say that he had destroyed the herd, but he had killed the cattle for their sakes. It was *'kokene yiekien ke yang'*, 'the ransom of their lives with cattle'. He repeated this phrase many times as one by one he recounted cases of serious sickness in his family and described the ox he had sacrificed on each occasion to placate the spirit *deng*. If his sons saw fit to complain let them regard their sisters. Would they not get the cattle of their sisters' bridewealth? And were not the cattle killed to save their sisters' lives?

782 The word *kuk* would seem therefore to suggest that God, or a
789 spirit, is placed by the sacrifice under an obligation. A woman says 'God, take thy cow and give me a child', and Nuer say of the river-spirit that 'it is given a gift and then it gives life to the people'. The child and the life are given to suppliants in return for the gifts they make. The action of the rite is not effective in itself. God, or a spirit, is not constrained by the sacrifice to grant the favour asked for. An animal sacrificed to God is his animal anyhow, and what he gives the suppliant in return is a *muc*, a free gift. Nevertheless, my impression was, at any rate where spirits of the air and of the earth are concerned, that Nuer feel that the recipient of a sacrifice

is at fault if it does not fulfil its part of the bargain. A costly sacri- 782
fice having been made, *cuong*, right or justice, is on the human 789
side in the matter. Thus the man of whom I was speaking above [755]
said during his harangue that after all the sacrifices he had made
to the spirit *deng* on account of sickness in his family, his little daughter had been bitten by a snake and died. He had given all these oxen to *deng* and look what had happened! He felt aggrieved and had consulted a prophet of *deng* who had told him that if the spirit had taken his daughter it would compensate him for his loss; and it had indeed done so by giving him twins: '*ca col e kwoth ke cuek*', 'it [the death of the daughter] was compensated by the spirit with twins'. The use of the word *col*, as will be seen later, here implies that the spirit was in debt to the man. This Nuer Job complained that the spirit had only compensated him because he told it that he had had enough of it and that it could take all his children if it pleased, for then he would have finished with it because it would have nothing more to take from him.

The word *kok* occurs in the other Nilotic languages with much 782
the same range of meaning, outside its sacrificial usage, as it has 437
today in Nuer, for one most frequently hears it used today to 196
describe the purchasing of goods from an Arab merchant. That a word which had chiefly, and perhaps primarily, a sacrificial meaning should come to be employed for the recent practice of buying something from a shop, a commercial sense it has also in other Nilotic tongues, sheds some light not only on Nuer ideas about trading but also on their ideas about sacrifice. Since the present range of meaning of the word includes buying and selling one might say that God or a spirit is 'bought' by sacrifice. The dangers of translation that beset one at every step in an attempt to understand and make intelligible Nuer religious ideas are here very apparent, for once we use the word 'bought' the associations it has among ourselves rush in to colour the Nuer conception. But Nuer do not regard purchase from an Arab merchant in the way in which we regard purchase from a shop. It is not to them an impersonal transaction, and they have no idea of price and currency in our sense. Their idea of a purchase is that you give something to a merchant who is thereby put under an obligation to help you. At the same time you ask him for something you need from his shop and he ought to give it to you because, by taking your gift, he has entered into a reciprocal relationship with

782 437 196 you. Hence *kok* has the sense of either 'to buy' or 'to sell'. The two acts are an expression of a single relationship of reciprocity. As an Arab merchant regards the transaction rather differently misunderstandings arise. In the Nuer way of looking at the matter what is involved in an exchange of this kind is a relation between persons rather than between things. It is the merchant who is 'bought' rather than the goods, just as it is God or a spirit who is bounden by sacrifice; or it can be better put by saying that the partners, Nuer and merchant, man and God, *kok* each other. The general notion conveyed by the word is therefore that of exchange. This sense covers, as do our own words 'ransom' and 'redemption', both religious and commercial usages. In both there is the idea of a relationship expressed in gift and counter-gift. The mere fact that the word has been made use of to denote what we regard as plain and simple commerce shows that some idea of a bargain is implied in its sacrificial use. Whatever else it may also be, sacrifice can be regarded, as Socrates says in the *Euthyphro*, as being in a sense a 'commercial technique', a way of doing business between gods and men. A bargain is struck. There is an exchange. This is further shown by the use of the verb *luel*, not in reference to any particular kind or situation of sacrifice but in invocations at personal sacrifices. A consideration of its use shows us better what sort of exchange Nuer sacrifice is.

782 755 One of Professor Westermann's texts records a sacrificial invocation made on behalf of a sick man. I would translate it as follows: 'God, what is this? Leave him with us; let him recover. Turn about, take thy cow. It has been decreed for the life. It is thou who hast spoken thus. Take the cow that it may be in exchange for the life (*bi je luele yei*). It is thou who hast created us; it is the cow which is exchanged for life (*e bi yang a luel ne yei*). Take the goat and the cucumber; and let him recover! In what have we erred? Give us the life. Thou art our father. Why must we always suffer? Give us the life, we pray thee, our father.'[1]

437 196 In other contexts the word *luel* means 'to exchange' or 'to change'. Something takes the place of another thing equal to it —a simple exchange of two things considered to be of more or less

---

[1] Op. cit., pp. 116–17. The sentence 'Take the goat and the cucumber' would not occur in any actual invocation, for the two things would not be sacrificed at the same time. Whoever spoke the text has inserted a gloss in the sense of 'Take the cow [ox], that is to say, the goat or the cucumber' [as the case may be].

equal value by the persons concerned in the exchange, as when a 437
man who is leaving his neighbourhood exchanges his old byre for 196
a bull calf or when a man exchanges an ox with certain markings desired by his partner to the exchange for one with his own favourite markings. The difference between *kok* and *luel* is that between the reciprocal relation between persons in an exchange and equivalence of objects exchanged. In either case the action is immediate, unlike that implied by use of the words *ngual*, to
borrow, and *gwal*, to lend. In loans a man makes a gift and the 426
recipient later returns it or something of greater value. There are two distinct and separate movements between which there is a
long passage of time. In its piacular context, therefore, the word 782
luel means that the life of the victim is exchanged in the moment 196
of its immolation for the life of a man. In the sacrificial situation the two things are of equal value, so that the one can be substituted for the other. This puts men and cattle in a very peculiar relationship to each other, a matter I discuss in Chapter X.

In personal and piacular sacrifices the animals are substitutions for men. To this extent sacrifice is an exchange, but it is also something very much more than just a simple exchange. It is not a simple idea at all but a very complex one in which many other elements are present. I discuss the problem in more general terms later, but we may here note how other terms are used to describe personal sacrifices which emphasize rather the related ideas of propitiation, expiation, atonement, and purification.

Sometimes the word *lor* is used to describe a sacrifice. The word 782
means 'to go to meet', perhaps its most common usage being to 789
describe the formal greeting that Nuer, especially women, make 196
to a visitor of importance when they go from their homes to receive him outside their homestead or village. The word has therefore the further sense of 'to honour', as would appear to be the case also in Dinka and other Nilotic tongues. But in the religious sense of the word people go out of their villages to meet a plague or other danger not with the purpose of bringing it to their homes to give it hospitality there but with the opposite purpose of preventing it from entering their homes. They go out to meet and stay a plague or murrain with sacrifice. They say '*bane je*
luor', 'let us go out to meet it'. The well-known prophet Ngundeng 782
of the Lou tribe did this in times of epidemics, sometimes, I was 789
told, sacrificing dozens of oxen and leaving their carcasses in

782
789
[726]
a line in the bush. He also used to sacrifice before his followers as they advanced to battle. His son Gwek appears to have met his death while making such a sacrifice before a military patrol sent against him. Mr. Coriat, one of the officers on this patrol, has described how the Nuer attack was launched. 'Two long lines of men rushed out to either flank in an attempt to surround the troops while the main body of Nuer in the centre advanced more slowly but singing lustily and driving ahead of them a solitary white bull. The order to fire was given. The leading men and the bull reached to within 120 yards of the square before they fell and within a few minutes the whole mass of Nuer were fleeing in all directions. A long pursuit over rough and broken ground followed. Gwek, arrayed in a leather skirt with an iron skewer clutched tight in his hand and a brass pipe, the pipe of Dengkur [Ngundeng], lying beside him, was picked up dead beside the white bull.'[1]

782
789
Other prophets acted in the same manner in epidemics and war. It has also been described to me how a whole section of the eastern Jikany Nuer went out to meet smallpox which was advancing into their territory. They went out to meet it with goats and sheep and pots of beer, and they slaughtered the animals and left their carcasses and the pots of beer in a line over which the smallpox should not cross. It was described to me as being like a *kegh*, a boundary line—more closely in meaning a line a leopard-skin priest makes on the ground before advancing warriors halt them so that a fight may be prevented.

When I was living in a small village on the Sobat river swarms of locusts descended on it and on its gardens, and the people went out to meet (*lor*) them in a body, leading a fawn-coloured goat (roughly the colour of the locusts) and beating their ox-hides, where the gardens adjoined the bush, and there sacrificed the goat. It fell with its head towards the bush. This was regarded as a favourable sign as it was in that direction that the people wanted the locusts to go. They soon departed. The carcass was left where it fell. I have earlier described how people go out to meet durra-birds which are eating their crops and how they make a similar sacrifice and leave the carcass in the bush. Nuer use the same word when speaking of the sacrifices made by kinsmen of twins at their birth. They say '*ba cuek luor*', 'the twins are met [with sacrifice]'.

---

[1] P. Coriat, 'Gwek, the Witch-Doctor and the Pyramid of Dengkur', *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1939, p. 237.

SACRIFICE

On those occasions on which Nuer use the word *lor* in a religious 782● context the danger is definite and immediately before them, and 789 it has to be met with sacrifice to propitiate God so that of his kindness he may stay its approach. It is true that they speak of going out to meet the smallpox, the locusts, the durra-birds, or whatever the threatening thing may be, but when they say that they 'meet it with a cow', that is, by sacrifice, we are to understand that the 'it' is not the thing itself but Spirit manifested in the thing. It is a vehicle of Spirit and only God can stay it. We have then in the concept of *luor* another element in sacrificial intention, homage to God by a whole community, or on its behalf, at a time of common crisis.

The word *kier*, with the verbal form *kir*, is more difficult to 782 translate than the other words used for sacrifice because it has no 783 meaning outside its sacrificial usage. I have translated it by 'expiation' because that idea together with the idea of purification seem to me to be strongly represented in the situations of its use, the appeasement of God or spirits when an event which places people in a state of danger, usually grave, has taken place. The danger, which is Spirit itself, is not merely possible, nor is it seen to be approaching. It is already present and people must rid themselves of it before it injures them or causes them further injury.

Nuer say of a spirit which has made a man seriously ill '*ba kwoth kier ke del*', 'expiation is made to the spirit with one of the flock'. They say of the sacrifice made after the burial of a man that '*ba kier piny ke del*', '[the dead man] is expiated in the earth with one of the flock'. They say of a byre which has been struck by lightning that '*ca kir ke ghok*', 'it has been expiated with cattle', and of a man killed by lightning that '*ca je kir ke det kene ruath*', 'he was expiated with some of the flock and with oxen'. When a speckled vulture settled on a man's head (pp. 88–89) expiation was made (*ca kir*) by sacrifice. I have also heard it said of sacrifices made on account of the birth of twins '*ca ke kir*' 'they [the twins] have been expiated'. One does not visit the home of a kinsman who has begotten twins without something to sacrifice in one's hands. Further examples of the use of the word *kier* for sacrifices are given by Father Kiggen, on account of a man being lost and on account of a bad dream.[1]

It may seem a peculiar expression to speak of a man, twins, and

---

[1] Op. cit., p. 145.

782 a byre being expiated and it is true that it is not they who are
783 expiated but the death of the man, the birth of the twins, and the striking of the byre by lightning, or rather, since these events are all signs of God's presence it is Spirit itself which is expiated. This is what is said, literally, in the first example of the use of *kier* I have given, '*kwoth* (Spirit) is expiated with one of the flock'. A payment is made to get rid of it and the state of danger its presence means. It is expiation in that sense, not in the sense of paying penalty for fault; for in the examples I have given the idea of fault, or at any rate of some definite fault, is negligible, if not altogether lacking. What we observe is a feeling of something dangerous being in the village, a sort of miasma, which must be dispelled if the people are to be at peace, and a defilement from which the people must be cleansed. In some of the examples the ideas of defilement and purification are apparent. Where this sense is strong the sacrifice is often accompanied by the rite of aspersion; and it may be noted that the word *kir* has in some of the other Nilotic languages the sense of 'to asperse', 'to sprinkle', and similar meanings.

We have seen that the *lor* concept adds the idea of honouring to that of an exchange or bargain in the general meaning of sacrifice. The *kier* concept adds something more. Sacrifice in the situations for which this word is used is made to prevent misfortune, or further misfortune, by an oblation. The danger is not disposed of till there has been an act of human will, a turning to God in sacrifice. Only when expiation has been made will it be wiped out. And the expiation is not just a payment, it is also the recognition of a debt: This aspect of sacrifice is most clearly brought out in the concept of *cuol*.

The ideas of expiation and purification are also markedly present in those sacrifices for which Nuer use the verb *col*, but there is a further and different emphasis as well. *Col* in its most general sense means, as in the other Nilotic languages, to pay compensation for an injury, and it is perhaps best translated 'to indemnify'. Indemnification for homicide or bodily injury, or indeed reparation made for any injury, may be spoken of as *col*. The word is also used in a religious sense when speaking of sacrifices to wipe out (*woc*) by indemnification the wrong done to God or a spirit by sin, such as, f[illegible] example, having harmed a totem; when sacrificing for sickness if the sickness is thought to be due to some particular

16: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1956
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

PLATE XI

•782

Death of victim and end of invocation

[facing p. 228]

782 fault; and, most specifically, to describe mortuary rites. The implication is that just as, let us say, a woman who has been wronged by her daughter's husband exposing his nakedness to her must be indemnified by a gift, so if God or a spirit is wronged by some act or neglect he or it must be indemnified by sacrifice. In the religious sense of the word it can perhaps best be translated 'to atone' and 'atonement'.

783

As the use of the word *col* implies in all other contexts that reparation for some wrong or fault is due we may suppose that it has something of the same sense when it is used with reference to mortuary ceremonies. A mortuary ceremony is known as *col woc*, an expression which might be translated by some such phrase as 'the wiping out of debt'. As it is not necessarily felt that any definite wrong has been done for which reparation must be made we may ask why this expression is used. I would answer that not only do Nuer seem to regard death itself as a kind of payment of debt, but they also seem to regard the dead man's kin as being involved in the debt, just as they would be had he incurred a debt to someone in his lifetime. The death still clings to them till they have made atonement by sacrifice and have been purified from its contamination by a purificatory rite which, while being particularly noticeable in the mortuary ceremonies, may accompany any sacrifice, such as those referred to by the terms *kier* and *cuol*, in which the idea of pollution is accentuated. The rite is known as *kith*, a word which means 'to sprinkle' and may be translated in its religious use as 'to asperse'. The aspergillum is a handful of wild rice, a plant which has other religious associations. It is dipped in water or milk or blood and water mixed and shaken over the persons involved in whatever the calamity may be, and in rites concerning death over the dead man's possessions as well. The word *kith* is also used for the sprinkling of beer at a ceremony in honour of a spirit over the ox dedicated to it, the beer being thrown over the animal's back by hand or blown over it from the mouth, a rite also called 'the bathing (of the ox)'; but here different ideas are expressed (pp. 42–43).

We may suppose that Nuer would not use so many different words when speaking of sacrifice unless the rite meant for them sometimes more one thing than another thing; and in our examination of these words we have found that they do indeed express rather different conceptions. No doubt these conceptions are only

782 variations of a single general meaning, are logically interconnected, and shade into one another, but they indicate nevertheless
783 distinct differences of emphasis. What all of them express, however, is the central piacular idea of substitution of lives of cattle for lives of men. That is on the surface. We have to inquire further if we are to understand its interior meaning.

CHAPTER IX

SPEAR SYMBOLISM

When I think of the sacrifices I have witnessed in Nuerland there are two objects I see most vividly and which sum up for me the sacrificial rite: the spear brandished in the right hand of the officiant as he walks up and down past the victim delivering his invocation, and the beast awaiting its death. It is not the figure of the officiant or what he says which evokes the most vivid impression, but the brandished spear in his right hand. 782

We have noted that the *lam* or invocation states the intention of the sacrifice. Its words are a projection of the will and desire of the person as he turns towards Spirit; and an essential part of the action is the brandishing of the spear. As the officiant walks up and down delivering his oration the movements of the spear in his right hand emphasize his words: opening and closing his fingers on it, poising it in his hand, raising it as though to strike, making little jabs with it into the air, pointing it towards the victim, and so on. These movements are an integral part of the expression of intention, and there is more in the action than meets the eye.

In Nuer ritual the meaning of symbolism is generally at once evident to ourselves, at any rate in its main import, for there is an intrinsic relation between the symbol and what it stands for. When an animal is cut in half in cases of incest, to allow inter-marriage between distant kin, before a man takes his dead brother's wife in leviratic union, at the closing of an age-set, in mortuary ceremonies, and on other occasions, we can at once perceive how the purpose of the rite is expressed in the severing of the carcass. A relationship of one kind or another between persons is being severed. Likewise the symbolism of the rite, common among primitive peoples, of putting out fires and relighting them at a man's mortuary ceremony, and in the case of the rehabilitation of a homicide the relighting of them with fire-sticks, is at once evident for us. The past is finished with; one begins anew.

The shaving of the head of a bride at her marriage, of a boy at his initiation, of a kinsman at a mortuary ceremony, and of a homicide at the settlement of a feud expresses, and brings about, 782 the passing from one state to another as obviously for us as for Nuer. Again, we can see immediately also the appropriateness of the action to the situation and purpose in the ritual making of a line or boundary (*kegh*). A leopard-skin priest cuts a line between opposing factions to forbid combat. The dominant lineages of the Gaagwong and Leek tribes may not, for a mythical reason, tether their cattle in a common kraal, but if they cannot conveniently avoid doing so a line of earth is thrown up between the sections of the kraal occupied by each. On the other hand, whilst there is generally a ridge of raised earth dividing adjacent gardens of neighbours this is absent when the owners of them are members of the same *ric* or age-set. When in certain ceremonies Nuer throw ashes into the air or asperse their bodies we do not have difficulty in perceiving that they are expressing the idea of evil being blown or washed away. Another, and final, example is that of a man who leaves the tribal territory where he was born and brought up to reside in the territory of a different tribe. He may then—it may not be a regular practice, though I was told that a man might die of *nueer* were he not to take the precaution—take a pot of earth from his natal territory and mix it in an infusion with earth from the territory of his adoption, and drink the infusion, on each occasion adding more of the new earth and less of the old, thereby slowly making the transference from his old to his new home. We have no difficulty at all in understanding and entering into this symbolism. Likewise we readily understand the imagery of various rites I have described in this book, such as the bending of a bracelet to close the jaws of crocodiles, the placing of the corpses of infant twins on branches of trees, and many other rites.

Since we at once perceive the meaning of the symbolism of the ritual action we may suppose that Nuer also perceive its logical fitness to its purpose; and, indeed, it is often certain that they do so, for if asked to explain what they are doing they interpret the symbolism of a rite in terms of its purpose. The symbolism is manifest to them, as it is to us. But there is a deeper symbolism which is so embedded in ritual action that its meaning is neither obvious nor explicit. The performer may be only partly aware or even unaware that it has one. Interpretation may then be difficult for a person of alien culture, and the door is open for every kind of extravagant guesswork to enter. Nevertheless, if it be rash in such circumstances to put forward symbolic interpretations of ritual acts, or features of them, we are sometimes compelled to make the attempt, as in this excursus on the spear, by the very emphasis given to them by the culture we are trying to understand. 782

Since we have no spears ourselves and nothing which takes their place in our lives it is difficult for us to appreciate their importance for Nuer. Nuer have no knives, other than that (*ngom*) used for cutting the marks of manhood at initiation, so that their fighting-spears, besides their use as weapons, have to serve where other peoples use knives.[1] A man's fighting-spear (*mut*) is constantly in his hand, forming almost part of him—when he is fighting, hunting, travelling, herding, dancing, displaying himself with his oxen, playing with his comrades, and so on—and when he lays it down it is within his reach; and he is never tired of sharpening and polishing it, for a Nuer is very proud of his spear. In writing a preliminary account of Nuer age-sets many years ago and without reference to the symbolic significance of the spear I wrote that 'one is surprised at the real feeling a Nuer expresses for his spear, almost as though it were animate and not a mere weapon'. Later I came to realize better that in a sense it is animate, for it is an extension and external symbol of the right hand, which stands for the strength, vitality, and virtue of the person. It is a projection of the self, so when a man hurls his spear he cries out either 'my right hand' or the name of the ox with which he is identified. 411

The spear, being an extension of the right hand, stands for all that the right hand stands for, for what is strong, virile, and vital, and consequently for masculinity and hence for the paternal kin and the lineage. Therefore during the discussions about bride-wealth in the byre of the bride's home on her wedding day the bridegroom's people sit on the right side of the byre and the bride's people on the left side. Therefore, also, when the carcasses of oxen sacrificed at marriage ceremonies are divided among the kin, the right fore and hind legs are the portions of the father's brothers and sisters and the left fore and hind legs are the portions of the mother's brothers and sisters. The left side symbolizes evil [826] 811

---

[1] Being the only thing they have which cuts and is therefore suitable for shaving—their other spears only pierce—the verbal form of the word for fighting-spear, *mut*, besides its meaning of 'to spear' means 'to cut' or 'to shave hair'. When used in the last sense it often refers to ritual shaving of the head, and it may then be used for the whole ceremony of which shaving of the head forms part, as the final marriage ceremony of consummation and ceremonies in connexion with death.

associated with courtship; and also in the pursuits of herding and 411
hunting. All these activities require the use of the spear, but it is 881
important that we recognize that it is not the acquisition of a weapon, whatever its economic value might have been in the past, nor even its utility, great though that may be, that gives a crucial significance to the gift of a spear at initiation. Its significance is moral, not merely utilitarian. It is not the spear itself, nor its possession, which is stressed but the activities associated with it: war and raiding, dancing and display, and herding. The uses of the spear itself and the evaluations of its uses as an index of social personality are blended, so that the spear is not just a weapon but also something which stands for a very complex set of social relations.

But the investment of a youth with a spear at his initiation 411
would seem to be something more, for, as we will see in discussing 881
the sacrificial role of cattle, initiation is not only into the social life
of adults but also into a new relationship with the cattle which 231
has an important religious side to it. There is now established an identification, deriving from the sacrificial situation, between the initiates and cattle and, looked at from this point of view, the rites of initiation may be said to have a sacramental character. The boy enters into communion with the spirits and ghosts of his lineage through the cattle. 'The spear of the cutting (initiation)' is thus a symbol of a sacramental change as well as of a change in social status. In both symbolic aspects it is an extension of, and stands for, the right arm and represents strength, strength of the soul as well as strength of the body of the person; and, as I shall attempt to show, in both the symbolism is also a representation of the collective strength of the lineage to which the person belongs.

I have suggested that the fighting-spear has a symbolic meaning 411
for Nuer besides what it means for them as a weapon and tool— 782
that it is a projection of the self and stands for the self. This is most important for an understanding of Nuer sacrifice. Its manipulation in the most common, and for a study of religion the most significant, sacrifices, the personal and piacular ones, expresses, if our interpretation is right, the throwing of the whole person into the intention of the sacrifice. It is not only said but also thought, desired, and felt. Not only the lips make it but also the mind, the will, and the heart. This interpretation makes the miming with the spear intelligible for, as an extension of the right arm, it stands

411 782 for the whole person.[1] It is for this reason that a spear must be carried during the invocation and not in order to slay the animal at the end of it. Other invocations by other men may follow before that is done, and the quick dramatic thrust into its heart which concludes the rite may be made by anyone, and not necessarily by a man who has made an invocation or by a spear used in the invocation.

411 782 614 But we have also to note that on many sacrificial occasions—those of a collective kind held in structural situations—when a man makes an invocation he does so as the representative of his clan (where 'clan' is used in this context 'clan or lineage' is to be understood—a man may be speaking in reference to his maximal lineage). He identifies himself with the clan by identifying his spear with that of the ancestor of the clan. It is his own spear which he brandishes but the name of the spear he shouts out as he does so is that of the spear of the ancestor of the clan, the clan spear-name. This is characteristic of sacrifices of the collective type, and it is towards them that the discussion is now directed.

[552] Each of the Nuer clans has a spear-name and sometimes a large lineage of a clan has a secondary name which is different from that of another lineage of the same clan. This spear-name is shouted out by a representative of the clan while he brandishes a spear in his right hand, in war, at weddings, and on other public occasions when the clan as a whole is concerned—ideally, that is, and never actively and corporately. It is especially shouted out as an exordium to sacrificial invocations on occasions of collective significance (pp. 288–9). It is '*mut gwara*', 'the spear of our fathers'. On such of these occasions as require the services of a leopard-skin priest he calls out the spear-name '*mut Geaka*', 'spear of Gee', a spear-name which combines the representation of the priestly office with that of the Nuer as a whole.

It is essential to note that, with two exceptions, no actual spears of the ancestors of the clans exist, and it is not held by Nuer that they ever did exist, except in the sense that the ancestors had their own spears. The virtue is in the idea of 'the spear of our fathers', not in any material clan relic. Consequently, in invocations any spear will serve the purpose of the rite and represent that of the

---

[1] Among the Shilluk the officiant rubs his spear on the back of the victim, as the Nuer places his right hand on its back (D. S. Oyler, *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1920, p. 298).

ancestor of the clan and hence symbolize the clan as a whole. Any 411
spear will do, but, for the reason I have stated, there must be a 782
spear; and when Nuer sitting in my tent recounted to me what is 614
said in invocations they gestured with their right hands as though they held spears in them, for they found it difficult to speak the words without making the gestures, just as in recounting what is said in prayers (*pal*) they found it difficult to do so without moving outstretched hands up and down.

Published literature on the Nuer records information about 411
only two actual spears of clans. The one about which we are told 614
most is the spear, called *wiu*, of the Gaatgankir clan, who are [177]
regarded by all, including themselves, as being of Dinka origin; and the spear is a Dinka, and not a Nuer, type of spear. A mysterious origin and power are attributed to it. It is believed to have been held by Kir, the ancestor of the clan, when he was cut out of the gourd in which he was found, and it is also associated with the air-spirit *wiu*, which is regarded as being in some sense immanent in it. When I was in Nuerland it was in the charge of a family of leopard-skin priests of the Tar lineage of the eastern Gaajak tribe. I did not myself see it, but it has been described by Mr. H. C. Jackson, who saw it in 1922 near the Pibor river.[1] He records that it was decorated with cowrie shells and beads and was housed in a special grass hut where visitors treated it with great deference. He says that it was prayed and sacrificed to, especially before raids on the Dinka and Burun peoples;[2] that if two sections of the Nuer wished to engage in fighting among themselves it would be placed between them to prevent an engagement; and that oaths were taken on it. I was told that only old people would look upon it. The importance of this spear to our discussion of clan spear-names is that, as I will explain later, all such spear-names have an

---

[1] H. C. Jackson, op. cit., pp. 168 and 179–81.

[2] We are probably to understand, in view of Nuer religious conceptions in general, that Nuer respect (*thek*) the spear and pray and sacrifice to the spirit *wiu*, which is in the sky as well as in the spear. Mr. R. T. Johnston reached the same conclusion with regard to a similar spear among the Bor Dinka. He observes that 'the spear by itself, except by association and as a symbol, is not sacred' (op. cit., p. 127). Dr. Lienhardt tells me that when the Government, with remarkable lack of imagination, confiscated and removed this spear lest it should become a focus of opposition to the administration the Dinkas' faith was in no way lessened. The only result was that the spirit associated with the spear, no longer having a recognized material symbol in a single place, manifested itself all over the tribal territory, defying any further intervention.

name of the person and Gaaliek the name of the lineage of his descendants.

I have attempted to show that the spear brandished in sacrificial 411
invocations stands for the person and that when this person speaks 782 ●
as a representative and on behalf of the clan, as he does in collec- 614
tive sacrifices, it stands for the clan. In the one case it is the right 826
hand (vitality) of the individual and in the other the right hand 721
(vitality) of the ancestor (the clan) which is emphasized. In the second case the spear is closely associated with the idea of the clan as a battle host.

When we ask why clans should be symbolized by a spear, or rather by the idea of a spear contained in a spear-name, and not by something else, we cannot give an acceptable answer in terms of the scarcity, and therefore high value, of iron nor in terms of simple utility. The symbol is not *yieth* or *you*, iron.[1] Nor is it the *bidh*, the fishing-spear, which is perhaps even more essential for Nuer than the fighting-spear, for they have no substitute for it and could not survive without a good supply of fish. It is the *mut*, the iron fighting-spear. The fact that the wood, horn, and bone pointed spears do not figure as symbols might suggest that it is because it is made of iron, which lasts longer and makes a more efficient weapon, that the *mut* is the symbol of clans, but it appears to me to be a more satisfactory explanation that it is because the *mut* not only stands for the right hand and hence vitality but is also the symbol of going to war and of making sacrifice.

The word *mut*, besides meaning a fighting-spear, has a general 411
sense of taking part in war and raiding: '*ce Nath wa mut*', 'the 721
Nuer went raiding'; '*ca mut nang Jaang*', 'war was taken (by the 613
Nuer) to the Dinka'. The idea expressed by the word *mut* in these 614
examples is not so much the general idea of war and raiding as the idea of a collectivity, the clan or lineage in its political or tribal embodiment, going to war or going on a raid. Hence Father Kiggen correctly translates '*te ke mud mediid*' (his spelling) as 'they have a big army'.[2] By synecdoche 'spear' stands for 'battle host'.

---

[1] It is true that Nuer lick any metal in taking an oath (p. 297), but I regard this as being a derivation from licking a spear, for which any metal stands as a substitute, in the same way as the honorific titles of the Gaatgankir clan, son, and daughter, of iron, derive from the *wiu* spear. The words *yieth*, metal, and *yiedh*, to spear or to stab, are surely connected.

[2] J. Kiggen, op. cit., p. 206. One may ask, in the light of this discussion about

spear *wiu*, as they do at present, and will respect (the word is here 552
used to balance the statement and not literally) only its name. As 411
we should put it, they will not then feel the need for a material 614
symbol of the spiritual relationship, and a verbal or ideational 721
symbol will suffice. The association of clan spears with the spirit *wiu* is clear to us when we recall that the spirit is also associated with lightning with which, in this hypostasis, God strikes as man strikes with the spear.[1]

In invocations in which clans are involved as such God is 552
appealed to, as I have explained earlier, in some refraction by 411
which he is figured as their patron. This is the '*kwoth gwara*', 'the 782
God of our fathers'. It is on such occasions also that the spear-name 614
of the clan is shouted out as an exordium to the invocation. This is the '*mut gwara*', 'the spear of our fathers'. I would suggest that we have here in the spear-name a symbolic representation of the clan in its relation to God. God is invoked in relation to the clan through the spear of the ancestor held in imagination in the hand of one of his descendants.

If this interpretation is right, then in those sacrifices in which the clan as a whole is concerned the calling out of the clan spear-name by the officiant identifies the whole clan with the intention of the sacrifice as spoken in the invocation. The sacrificial spear in his hand becomes through the exordium the clan sacrificial spear through which in symbol the whole clan offers up the victim to God. The officiant in such sacrifices must therefore be a representative of the clan, what the Nuer call a *gwan buthni*; whereas in personal and piacular sacrifices, in which appeal is made on behalf of an individual or a number of individuals, anyone can officiate and the officiant is usually a senior member of the family or kin of the sacrificer. The intention, and therefore character, of the sacrificial act is different in the two cases. In the first it is of the nature of a validation, in the second of the nature of a *piaculum*; though in some situations there may be a broad overlap. Religion has always these two sides, the one concerned chiefly with the social life and the other with the relation of the individual soul to its God.

---

[1] Nuer, however, use for God striking a man with lightning the verbs *mar*, to strike, and *pim*, to strike in the sense of 'to hit' or 'to punch', and not *yiedh*, to strike in the sense of to thrust or to stab.

231 881 their wearing, incapable of use, and that they also render useless the left horns of their favourite oxen by deforming them.*

Human thought and expression are inevitably constructed out of man's experience of the world around him. There is nothing that should surprise us in Nuer speaking metaphorically of boys by the same word (*ruath*) as they use for young bulls and for the male young of other animals, and, by contrast, of men by the same word (*tut*) as they use for adult bulls and adult males of other animal species. It is natural—it would be remarkable were it not so—that Nuer use cattle metaphors in speech and gesture. Nevertheless, the evidence, some of which I have presented, suggests that there is more in it than that. Whether Professor Seligman's psychological use of the word 'identification' is correct is a question that lies outside my own competence and the scope of this book, but it cannot be denied that there is a moral identification, a participation imposed on the individual by his culture and inextricably bound up with religious values. When henceforward I speak of identification it is to be understood in this sense.

*[See p. 235, cat. 116, —Analyst]

II

231 782 613 614 We have noted that there is a personal side and a collective side to Nuer religion and that we may speak of personal and collective types of sacrifice. We have noted also that in the collective type the officiant represents the whole clan, that the spear he holds in his hands is that of the ancestor of the clan, and that he invokes God as the God who created his ancestor and the God of his fathers. We have further noted that the sacrificial victim, although in fact it is an ox or a surrogate for an ox, is not spoken of as *thak*, ox, but as *yang*, cow, a general term referring to any bovine beast, with a plural form *ghok*, meaning 'cattle'. This suggests that the victim embodies the general idea of the equivalence of cattle and men in the sacrificial act, and there is certainly what we may speak of as a collective identification of clans and lineages with their herds. This is expressed in the honorific titles of clans and lineages. We have been discussing hitherto the equation of man with ox. These titles introduce us to the idea of an enduring relationship between a social group and its ancestral herd.

On the day when, by the cutting of lines on his forehead, a boy

231
613
553
196

male members of a human lineage, a line of descent. In tracing back the lineage of a beast, which Nuer can sometimes do to several generations, they do so by the points of the dams and not the points of the sires: an ox of certain markings was born of a cow of certain markings and it of a cow of other markings. Descent in the herd is, so to speak, traced matrilineally; and it is the cows which are seen as the stable element, which calve cow-calves, which calve cow-calves in their turn, and so provide the constant and continuous nexus between herd and lineage. Consequently, if at marriage most of a herd is dispersed and only a core is retained, it is some cows which are kept so that the herd may be built up anew through them. Therefore, it is to the cows of the ancestors, and not to their bulls, that the honorific titles of clans and lineages refer.

The lineage–herd equation can thus be considered as a collective expression of the man–ox equation. The one does not derive from the other but they are parts of a single complex representation, which finds its most logical expression in the rites of sacrifice. The name of the ox of the speaker may be shouted out in sacrificial invocations because its name stands for his own, but when the sacrifice is on behalf of a whole clan the exordial words are the spear-name of the clan, which goes together with the cow-title of the clan, representing the relation of the clan to its ancestral herd. The two symbols, ox-name and spear-name, represent two aspects of the sacrificial relationship between men and cattle, the personal and the collective. The one or other aspect is emphasized according to the nature of the sacrifice.

III

231
•782

The facts we have examined, taken severally or together, point to the conclusion that there is the idea of equivalence between men and cattle, and the only plane on which there is anything that can be called equivalence is that on which men and cattle are things of the same order, so that one can be substituted for the other, namely in sacrifice, or in other words in relation to God. We have seen that in those sacrifices which have the most significance for the study of Nuer religion, the personal ones, the lives of oxen are substituted for the lives of men. This is not only evident in what

Nuer say but is indicated also in the rites themselves, and especially in the rite of consecration. In discussing this rite I speak for the present only of personal sacrifice. 231 782

When ashes are rubbed on the back of an animal in giving it to a spirit I speak of the act as one of dedication. When they are rubbed on its back in sacrifice I speak of it as consecration. It is useful to make this distinction for several reasons. Animals are not dedicated to God except on rare occasions when sacrifice is to take place shortly afterwards, but they are consecrated to him in sacrifice. Cows are the animals usually dedicated to spirits, whereas it is oxen which are sacrificed. Though even a cow dedicated to a spirit may ultimately be sacrificed and at least one of its male calves is destined for sacrifice, sacrifice does not follow dedication, if at all, for months or even years after the dedication. What is devoted by dedication to a spirit is the animal and its milk, but when ashes are rubbed on the back of a beast at sacrifice what is devoted is its life. That there is a difference of meaning between the two acts is shown by the fact that an animal which has been dedicated to a spirit by ashes being rubbed on its back has ashes again rubbed on it when it is sacrificed to that spirit. It is—if we care to use these terms—dedicated to the spirit in the first act and consecrated for sacrifice to it in the second. The difference is that the rubbing of ashes in dedicating an animal to a spirit is the sign and the manner of its passing out of man's possession (though in fact he does not part with it) into a spirit's possession, whereas the rubbing of ashes in consecrating an animal for sacrifice is a substitution of life of man for life of beast and hence also an identification of man with beast, sacrificer with victim.

It will be remembered that in sacrifice the animal is consecrated with ashes, has an invocation spoken over it, and is speared. I have already discussed the *lam* or invocation. What concerns us now is the *buk*, the consecration. This word, which in other Nilotic languages has the sense of 'to smear' and sometimes of 'to sacrifice', means in Nuer 'to rub' or 'to smear' and generally 'to rub with ashes'. In a sacrificial context it describes the placing, and usually lightly rubbing, of ashes on the victim's back. It is clear that it is a rite of consecration, the animal's life being thereby devoted to God; but also ~~in the~~ personal and piacular sacrifices it is, as we have seen, sanctified for sacrifice in substitution for the life of a man. It would seem, therefore, that the laying of the right

231
782

hand on the animal's back identifies the man who lays it, or the person on whose behalf he is acting, with the beast, the right hand standing, as we have earlier noted, for the whole person. If this is so, then it is himself, or the person for whom he is proxy, that the officiant offers up; or, to put it in another way, in the act of consecration the representations of man and ox, of sacrificer and victim, are fused.

This interpretation is supported by the fact that when ashes are ritually rubbed on persons the meaning which fits the action best is unity, solidarity, or identification, the expression of the idea of 'I am with you', as when, for example, before initiation a boy's father, maternal uncle, and family's master of ceremonies rub (*buk*) his forehead with ashes, uttering an invocation, or when a man returns from a long journey and his father rubs ashes on his forehead. It is confirmed by two other observations. As we have noted, there is no laying of hands on cattle sacrificed at mortuary ceremonies, nor is there, Dr. Smith tells me, in sacrifices at *colwic* ceremonies. They are given to God, but the person on whose behalf they are sacrificed is dead. Also, cattle slain for reasons other than for sacrifice may have an invocation said over them but there is no laying on of hands.

I discuss this question again later in relation to the whole rite of sacrifice and the various theoretical interpretations of it which students have put forward. We may here note further, however, that the fact that it is ash which is placed on the back of the victim and not something else and that this ash must be that of cattle-dung (*pou*) and not wood-ash (*ngeth*) may be significant, for the ash is taken from the *gol*, the household smudge which symbolizes for Nuer the home in various senses. *Gol* means primarily the home in a domestic sense. It is identified with the father of a family, *gol* so-and-so being the 'home' of that man and hence his 'family' also. But it can also be used for the lineage, 'the family' in that wider sense. The ash comes from the *gol* which represents the family or the lineage, and the officiant who places it on the animal's back represents, according to the type of sacrifice, either the members of the family or the members of the lineage.

THE SACRIFICIAL ROLE OF CATTLE

IV

231
782
574

It may be asked how the fact that in piacular sacrifice an ox is substituted for a man affects the general relationship of men to cattle. The answer is that all cattle are reserved for sacrifice. It is not just that in a particular ceremony a particular ox stands for a particular man. The equivalence is a general one between men and cattle. Some caution is necessary here. Nuer are very fond of meat, and whether an animal is killed in sacrifice or dies a natural death its flesh is eaten. All cattle, sheep, and goats, except those sacrificed in holocausts, eventually go into the pot. Also, it is very noticeable that on ceremonial occasions which are not also occasions of calamity, most people show more interest in the festal than in other aspects of the ceremonies. People show their desire for meat without reserve and it is the festal character of sacrifices which gives them much of their significance in the life of the Nuer. This is perhaps most noticeable at weddings, when, moreover, those who get the flesh are not those who sacrifice the animal; and also on those occasions when men scramble for meat. Further, Nuer themselves recognize that some men are too eager to sacrifice an ox, sheep, or goat on the slightest excuse, a craving for meat rather than a pressing need for spiritual aid being the incentive for sacrifice. It is undoubtedly true that it is sometimes craving for meat which reminds a man that sacrifice to some spirit is long overdue, religious obligations providing a ready excuse for a feast. However, the fact that Nuer accuse men of making unnecessary sacrifices to have feasts of meat in itself shows that animals should not be slaughtered except in sacrifice; and there is indeed a very strong feeling, amounting to a moral injunction, that domestic animals—sheep and goats as well as cattle—must not be slaughtered except in sacrifice and, save in very special circumstances, they are never slaughtered for food, a fact noted by Ernst Marno nearly a century ago.[1] This injunction explains why Nuer are not expected to, and do not, provide meat for guests, and also why I was unable to buy beasts from them for food for my own household.

---

[1] Op. cit., p. 348. The Dinka likewise do not slaughter cattle for food (see that curious book *The Ethiopia Valley*, n.d., pp. 10 and 39, by Hatashil Masha Kathish, a Dinka convert to Christianity). This is the case among many African pastoral peoples.

231 881 young men attend dances, which therefore do not take place at this time. Also, they may have no contact of any kind with the herds other than with the oxen with which they are segregated. It is to be noted further that the borrowing from kin and neighbours of oxen for slaughter by youths whose families are unable to provide them with suitable animals is no ordinary loan but is of a peculiar and ritual character. The owner of a beast who is asked for it by a youth may not refuse the request, and not only for social reasons but also, says Dr. Howell, because 'he would run the risk of spiritual contamination resulting in sickness or even death among the members of his family'.[1] Nor may he demand repayment for some years. These facts considered in the light of the great reluctance, to say the least of it, of Nuer to kill an ox other than for sacrifice suggest strongly that a slaughter on this scale has some religious significance. I asked Dr. Lienhardt and Dr. Smith to inquire about this matter. The former informs me that an old man makes an invocation over one of the oxen, which stands for all of them, and the latter that the older men who have contributed the beasts make invocations over them, though they do not consecrate them with ashes. It would seem, therefore, that if their slaughter is not a proper sacrifice it has to some extent a sacrificial character. It is significant also that not only is the killing obligatory but also that each youth ought to provide an ox for slaughter, an ox for a man, for we seem to have here again the equivalence of a man with an ox, which is the basis of piacular sacrifice; and it can easily be seen that the death of an ox at the termination of the rites of initiation would be a sacramental act appropriate to the whole setting of initiation.

231 782 784 Except on those rare occasions when dire necessity or custom compels them to do so, Nuer do not kill cattle except in sacrifice; and it is regarded as a fault to kill them '*bang lora*', 'just for nothing', the Nuer way of saying that they ought not to be killed for meat. This is clearly shown, apart from the facts I have already instanced, by the statement that an ox slain simply from desire for meat may *cien*, take ghostly vengeance on, its slayer, for it has *cuong*, right, in the matter. Maybe Nuer do not take this very seriously, but that they say it at all is an indication of how they regard the matter, for, as we have seen, they fear ghostly vengeance and hold that it operates only because God is permissive,

---

[1] Ibid., p. 176.

231 seeing that an injustice has been done. The man had no right to
782 take the life of the ox and by doing so he committed a fault. In
sacrificial invocations Nuer explain to God why the life of the ox
784 is being taken, and they may also address the ox and tell it why it is being killed—not that they think it understands. They are justifying themselves in taking its life.

Consequently I was not surprised to learn from Dr. Mary
231 Smith, whom I asked to inquire into the question, that when cattle
731 are killed in time of famine Nuer, though they do not consecrate
782 the beasts, may make an invocation over them asking God that 'the meat may be soft in their stomachs and not bring them sickness'. This does not constitute sacrifice, there being no sacrificial intention, but it shows that there is a feeling of guilt about killing animals for food even when hunger compels it, and we can say that all cattle, and also sheep and goats, are reserved, or set apart, for sacrifice and their lives should not be taken, except in the special circumstances I have mentioned, for any other purpose. In that sense we may speak of cattle as being 'sacred'. If we do so, however, we must note that they are not sacrificed because they are regarded as sacred intrinsically, or for reasons extraneous to the sacrificial situation, but, on the contrary, they are regarded as sacred only because they are reserved for sacrifice and in the sense defined by that purpose. I have discussed beasts of the herd only and not those of the flock because, as we have noted earlier, in sacrifices they are 'cattle', surrogates for oxen. It is pre-eminently their role to play the victim's part in sacrifice and they are consequently also reserved for sacrifice, but the sacrificial equivalence is always between *ran* and *yang*, man and 'cow', never between man and sheep or goat, for even when it is a sheep or goat which is being killed the ideal equivalence is preser[illegible]n speech.

231 In order that the sacrificial killing of beasts of the flocks and
[262] herds may be seen in a wider setting both of the taking of lives
of creatures and of the eating of flesh, it should be realized that,
224 except for fish, Nuer seldom kill wild creatures but rely almost entirely on the flesh of their domesticated animals for meat. For religious reasons they are averse to killing birds, except occasionally the ostrich, to which the same symbolism does not attach, for its feathers; and also reptiles, except the turtle and the crocodile (perhaps occasionally the monitor lizard). But even where there is no objection to killing animals, as in the case of mammals, Nuer

him how to pound millet so that he now satisfies his hunger only 838
by ceaseless labour. The sexual organs attached themselves to man 825
and woman so that they are now constantly desirous of each other. 773
Mouse taught man how to beget and woman how to bear. Dog brought fire to man. And we are told that while fox was plotting to sow dissension among the beasts he gave man the spear and taught him how to use it. It was then that man began to kill, and his first killing seems to have been that of the mother of cow and buffalo, or rather the mother of cattle, for at that time cows and buffaloes were the same. This led to a feud between men and cattle, buffaloes avenging their mother by attacking men in the bush and cows by causing men to quarrel and slay one another.

It may perhaps sharpen our focus on sacrifice to know not only 773
that Nuer seldom kill wild animals but also that they can imagine 782
a state in which man did not kill, that there might have been a 231
beginning to killing as to coitus, to pounding grain, and to other things men do now. Viewed in relation to the dialectic of the stories, the killing of cattle is then seen not to be, as it were, derived from a state of nature in which men kill animals for food, as just one sort of killing among others, but as a product of a new dispensation in which cattle are allotted a sacrificial role and are set apart for this purpose. Other animals may, as a matter more or less of chance, and now and again, be killed, but it is the role and destiny of cattle to be slaughtered in sacrifice. Sacrificial slaughter thus stands at the very centre of the idea of killing, and sacrificial flesh at the very centre of the idea of feasting.

We may conclude, therefore, that the observations we have 231
made earlier concerning the relationship of a man with his 782
favourite ox, the ritual of initiation, &c., must be viewed in the light of the identification of men with cattle in sacrifices. A Nuer does not look upon his cattle as a stockbreeder or dairy farmer does, for in his case his relationship to his beasts is complicated, apart from their use in marriage, by their reservation for sacrifice. And it is not just that he must not kill cattle except in sacrifice because if he were to slaughter them for meat he would lower his resources for food, marriage, and religious purposes. It is not merely a negative injunction. It is not 'thou must not kill' but 'thou must sacrifice'. It is not that they must only kill for sacrifice but that they must sacrifice to kill.

We must not be led astray by this conclusion to suppose that in

231/771/ We must not be led astray by this conclusion to suppose that in the everyday life of the Nuer they think of and treat their animals in a 'religious' manner. They do not even treat those dedicated to spirits in any special way. Ordinarily Nuer think of their beasts from the practical point of view of herdsmen who are largely dependent on them for food and are dependent on them entirely for marriage. But if it would be a mistake to leave out of consideration the practical uses of cattle it would be no less a mistake were we to ignore the religious significance they have for Nuer. This is easier to do for two reasons. Firstly, because Nuer are themselves reticent in speaking of their cattle in this connexion. They tend to be reserved in discussing religious matters, and it may even be said that a certain secrecy adheres to them; and those whom a European tends to know best, the younger men, have less awareness of the sacramental role of cattle than the older people. Secondly, because we have no direct experience of our own which associates animals with anything similar in our culture. We are, therefore, inclined to reason that cattle have ritual significance because they have great practical value. If this were really so the cow, and not the ox, would be the object of identification, but, apart from that consideration, an attempt to interpret the religious importance of cattle on this one-way track of reasoning changes the whole character of the relationship between men and cattle. It makes the animals themselves to be in some way the object of religious attention, and nothing could be farther from the truth.

231/782 The religious significance of cattle is of a very different kind. Cattle are necessary to Nuer not only for food and marriage but also for salvation, for the sanctification of their social undertakings and for overcoming evil in its twofold character of sickness and sin. As Professor Westermann's text has it, 'she (the cow) was ordered (by God) for the deliverance of souls'.[1] This soteriological function pertains to cattle as much as their economic, bridewealth, and other functions. It is not just that in Nuer sacrifices something that for other reasons is valuable obtains through its consecration and sacramental death a religious significance, which would consequently be secondary and momentarily derived from the immediate sacrificial act. The sacrificial role is always dormant in cattle, which in sacrifice are being used for an ordained purpose for which they are set apart. This is why the rubbing of ashes on an ox's back while uttering some short prayer or invocation is a rite which can at any time be performed. The animal, even when not dedicated to a spirit, is already destined for sacrifice. The sacrificial situation is present, as it were, in the act, though no actual sacrifice is made. 231 782

---

[1] Or, as I have translated the passage (p. 224): 'It [the cow] has been decreed for the life [of man].'

When, therefore, we seek to estimate what their cattle are to Nuer and how they see them, we have to recognize that they are the means by which men can enter into communication with God, that they are, as Father Crazzolara puts it, 'the link between the perceptible and the transcendental'.[1] In fulfilling this role, his cattle shield a man and his family from disaster, and he conceives of them also collectively as a herd which from the beginning of time has helped his fathers in distress, performing in each generation the same sacrificial service. In the time of the ancestor of his clan the 'cow' gave her life for his salvation and so it is today. Whence springs the identification of man with ox, of lineage with herd, and of men with cattle. 231 782 771

---

[1] J. P. Crazzolara, 'Die Bedeutung des Rindes bei den Nuer', *Africa*, 1934, p. 320.

CHAPTER XI

THE MEANING OF SACRIFICE

I

● 782 THE points I have tried to establish with regard to Nuer sacrifice are as follows. (1) There are two broad types of sacrifice, that which is chiefly concerned with social relations—changes of social status and the interaction of social groups—and that which is concerned rather with the moral and physical welfare of the individual. Our attention has been mostly directed to the second, the personal and piacular type, because of its greater importance for an understanding of Nuer religion; but it was not possible to draw a firm line of demarcation between the two classes. (2) The piacular sacrifices are performed in situations of danger arising from the intervention of Spirit in human affairs, often thought of as being brought about by some fault. In such sacrifices ideas of propitiation and expiation are prominent. They centre, however, in the general idea of substitution of life of ox for life of man. (3) Almost all sacrifices consist of four movements—formal presentation, consecration, invocation, and immolation. It is particularly in the invocation and consecration that we must look for the meaning of the whole drama. The invocation states the intention of the sacrifice, and it is made with the spear in the right hand. The spear represents the virtue and vitality of man and through it, as well as by speech, he throws his whole self into the intention. In symbol the spear is the man. When a whole lineage or clan is concerned in the sacrifice the spear is that of the ancestor of the lineage or clan and represents the whole group which, through its representative, offers up the victim. (4) The consecration by placing ashes on the back of the victim with the right hand is also, at any rate in the piacular sacrifices, a gesture of identification of man with victim; and this is a special and emphatic expression within the sacrificial situation of an identification which has a more general denotation, perhaps arising from that situation, for in sacrifice man and ox can be said to be really equivalent. So if in symbol the sacrificial spear is the man, so also is the sacrificial victim. We may now ask

ourselves what light is shed by what we have discovered about 782
Nuer sacrifice on theories of sacrifice put forward by anthropologists and others and attempt, with the aid of these theories, and in terms of them, to reach a deeper understanding of it.

Much has been written about the nature of sacrifice, and this is 782
not surprising in view of the central position it has had in the 121
Hebrew and Christian religions and in the religions of pagan Greece and Rome. As is well known, there have been two main theories of sacrifice, the communion theory and the gift theory. The communion theory was given wide currency by Robertson Smith in his *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1889). Briefly, his theory was that primitive sacrifice, and particularly early Semitic sacrifice, was a feast in which the god and his worshippers ate together. It was a communion or act of social fellowship—not a gift, not a tribute, not a covenant, not an expiation, not a propitiation. All these ideas were either much later or, if present in the earliest forms of sacrifice, were secondary or even merely germinal. Moreover, the sacrificial victim was a sacred beast, not in virtue of being set apart or consecrated for sacrifice, but intrinsically. It was the totem of the clan and hence of the same blood as the people who slew it and ate it. But in a sense it was also the god himself, for the god was the ancestor of the clan and therefore kin to both his worshippers and their totemic victim. By sacramentally eating their god, the theanthropic and theriomorphic victim, the worshippers acquired spiritual strength.

The totemic part of this theory is unacceptable, since there is almost no evidence that can be adduced in support of it, either from the literature concerning the early Hebrews, with whom Robertson Smith was chiefly concerned, or from accounts of primitive peoples, to which he made appeal. Moreover, I think that every competent Old Testament scholar would today admit the accuracy of Buchanan Gray's conclusions that the idea of gift rather than that of communion was predominant in even the earliest Hebrew sacrifices known to us, that the ideas of expiation and propitiation were present in these earliest sacrifices, and that it is clear that by the time of Deuteronomy a eucharistic intention was present.[1] Even, therefore, in its more reasonable form, minus the totemic character of the victim, Robertson Smith's attempt to

---

[1] Buchanan Gray, *Sacrifice in the Old Testament: Its Theory and Practice*, 1925, pp. 1–82.

782 show that festal communion between worshippers and their gods
121 was the original form of Semitic sacrifice could only be a highly speculative hypothesis for times for which records, and hence evidences, are totally lacking. Nor do ethnographic accounts support it with regard to predominantly theistic religions, such as that of the Nuer. They only show, if their conclusions are correct, that among some peoples, such as some of the Bantu[1] who have a cult of the ancestors, sacrifices are sometimes communion feasts at which the ghosts and their living kinsmen are thought to feed together on the victim.

The communion theory as held by Robertson Smith and those who have accepted his interpretations gives us little aid towards understanding the nature of Nuer sacrifices to God, and they do not lend it support. The idea is excluded by definition in the case of their holocausts. The flesh of other victims can only be said to be in any sense sacred in such sacrifices as those in which parts of it may not be eaten by the sacrificers. In their common sacrifices of wild cucumbers the victims are in any case inedible. In none of their sacrifices is there any suggestion that God partakes of the essence of the flesh. What goes to him is the life, and it would be to extend the communion theory beyond legitimate bounds to say that his taking—not consuming—the life and man's eating of the flesh constitute a communion in the sense given to the idea by its upholders. Moreover, though men eat the carcass, and any man may partake of the flesh, their eating of it, however important socially this festal side to sacrifice may be, is not a sacramental meal but an ordinary commensual act of family or kin which, moreover, falls outside the sacrificial rites. Those who eat the flesh are not thought to gain spiritual strength by doing so. It might be held that the juices of the cucumber, and occasionally the chyme of a beast, have a sacramental use in the sacrificial situation, but the same could not be maintained of the flesh of animal victims. In the etymological sense of the word 'sacrifice' it is the life which is made *sacer* by the consecration, not the flesh which the sacrificers and others eat.

It is only in a mystical, and not in a material, sense that Nuer sacrifice might be called a communion, in the sense that through sacrifice man communicates with God, who is invoked to be present (*in-vocare*) to receive the life of the consecrated victim and

---

[1] W. C. Willoughby, *The Soul of the Bantu*, 1928, pp. 396 seq.

782
121

to hear what it is that those who make the sacrifice desire of him. It is communion in this sense of union, of a *communio* established through the victim, that H. Hubert and M. Mauss were speaking of in their 'Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice'[1] when they said that in sacrifice a communication is established between the sacred and the profane by the intermediation of a victim. We may readily accept that the victim is an intermediary between God and man, in that they are brought together in the offering of its life. And if we ask why communion should be through a life, we are given an answer by the fourth-century neo-Platonist Sallustius,[2] that two living objects which are distant from one another can only be brought into union (*συναφή*) by means of an intermediary (*μεσότης*) of the same order, a third life.

We have, nevertheless, to bear in mind that the purpose of Nuer piacular sacrifices is to establish communication with God rather in order to keep him away or get rid of him than to establish a union or fellowship with him. What Georges Gusdorf[3] says of religious sacrifice in general, that it is made not only to the gods but against the gods, is very true for the Nuer, in whose piacular sacrifices prophylactic and apotropaic features are very evident. They are made in times of trouble, present or feared, and the trouble comes from God and in a sense is God. Sacrifice is made to persuade him to turn away from men and not to trouble them any more. It is made to separate God and man, not to unite them. They are already in contact in the sickness or other trouble. The sacrifice is intended to rid the sufferer of the spiritual influence whose activity is apparent in the sickness. There is here a paradox. God is separated from man by an act which brings them together. The solution of the paradox would seem to lie in a distinction between two kinds of union, union on a material plane which is to be dissolved in the moment of sacrifice by bringing about union on a moral plane. This solution is consistent with the Nuer representation of sickness in which the sickness itself, the moral or spiritual state of the sufferer, and the action of Spirit form a complex whole; and also with the essential ambiguity of their conception of God as the source of good and ill.

---

[1] Op. cit., p. 133.

[2] Sallustius, *Concerning the Gods and the Universe*, edit. with Prolegomena and Translation by Arthur Darby Nock, 1926, pp. 29-30 (sect. xvi of text).

[3] *L'Expérience humaine du sacrifice*, 1948, p. 78.

THE MEANING OF SACRIFICE

II

782
121
Much older than the communion theory of sacrifice is the gift theory, supported among anthropological writers by Sir Edward Tylor and Herbert Spencer. For Tylor[1] sacrifices are gifts made to a deity as if he were a chief. This would not be a happy explanation for Nuer sacrifice, as they have no chiefs. For Spencer[2] sacrifice has developed from the placing of offerings on the graves of the dead to please their ghosts. This would also not be a happy explanation in the case of the Nuer, who do not make offerings in this manner to the dead. Other writers who regard sacrifice as being essentially a gift to gods stress a variety of motives: to nourish the gods, to obtain favours from them, to propitiate their wrath, to draw nearer to them, to create harmony between God and man, to expiate sins; or they emphasize their eucharistic, commemorative, or other intentions.

Now Nuer sacrifice is clearly a gift of some sort. They say that they are giving God a thing, a gift. But it is a gift which is immolated, it is that which makes the offering a sacrifice. And the gift must be a life or something which stands for a life. Moreover, a gift is a far from simple idea. It is a symbol which may have many different meanings and shades of meaning. We have to determine what sense or senses it has in Nuer sacrifices.

In their piacular sacrifices to God, which I am now discussing, they give something to get rid of some danger or misfortune, usually sickness. We found that the general idea underlying such sacrifices was that of substitution, the life of a beast being given in exchange for the life of a man. The ideas of purchase, redemption, indemnification, ransom, exchange, bargain, and payment are very evident in Nuer sacrifices, as the words by which they refer to them indicate; and they are not peculiar in this, for, as Hubert and Mauss rightly emphasize, there is probably no sacrifice in which there is not some idea of redemption and something of the nature of a contract.[3] As in the reciprocity of all giving and receiving, as Mauss points out also in his 'Essai sur le Don',[4] sacrifice establishes a contractual relationship between persons, those who give and those who receive. We can say definitely that a relationship of this kind, based on a sort of exchange, is involved in Nuer sacrifices; but if they include, they go beyond, the dialectic of exchange and contract, even when thought of in terms of persons and not of things, for we can hardly speak of simple exchange or contract when one side in reality gets nothing and the other side may get nothing too.

---

[1] *Primitive Culture*, 1913 ed., chap. xviii.

[2] *The Principles of Sociology*, vol. ii, 1885, p. 102.

[3] Op. cit., p. 134.

[4] *L'Année sociologique*, 1925, pp. 53-60 (Eng. trans. by Ian Cunnison: *The Gift*, 1954, pp. 12-16).

This is an old problem. Since in most Nuer sacrifices men eat the carcass of the victim, what is God supposed to receive? Nuer say that he gets the life, but they also sense that, as this is his already, he gets nothing. It is his already not only in that it is no longer man's because man has consecrated it to him, so that in the sacrificial invocation the officiant tells God to take 'thy cow' and not 'my cow' or 'our cow', sometimes putting his hand on the beast or pointing at it with his spear as he does so to direct attention to the devoted animal, and uses the expressions *kam yang*, to give a beast in the sense of delivering what is due, and *kan yang*, to take a beast in the sense of taking what is the right of the taker. Nor is it his only in the wider sense that all beasts of the flocks and herds are in a general way of speaking devoted to him, being reserved for sacrifice to him, so that they ought not to be killed for any other purpose. The victim is always his in a yet more general religious sense which extends beyond, and is not derived from, the sacrificial situation, in the sense, that is, that everything belongs to him. In giving a beast to God man without doubt loses *something but God, to whom it belongs anyhow, gains nothing*. But though this sense of God's ownership may be general it is not unprecise. Thus, Nuer do not complain when a beast is killed by lightning or sickness, for God has a right to take his own, and here also they speak to God about it as '*yangdu*', 'thy cow', so the expression is not determined by formal consecration, which merely gives greater emphasis to it. All life belongs to God. It comes from him and to him it returns, and when he wants it he takes it. Indeed, his taking a beast by lightning or sickness has a certain similarity to sacrifice in that Nuer say that God takes the life of the beast in the place of the life of its master, the beast, as they say, in this manner shielding the man; but it differs otherwise from true sacrifice where man makes an offering of his own accord, and what he offers is a consecrated life.

If God gains nothing have we then to interpret Nuer sacrifice in terms of what man loses, in the sense of abnegation the word

● 782
121

'sacrifice' has come to have in our own language? Is it that man deprives himself of something that should take the emphasis? This also is an old problem. It cannot be denied that, although there is no sacrificial tariff, Nuer feel that the greater the crisis the greater should be the offering. At least some cattle should be slaughtered to stay a plague, and their carcasses are abandoned. In mortuary ceremonies oxen, and even cows, must be sacrificed. In cases of serious sin or grave sickness it is desirable to sacrifice an ox if one can be spared. In lesser crises a goat or a sheep suffices, or even a cucumber. All this suggests that the greater the danger the higher should be the payment, the more valuable the gift or substitute and the more complete the surrender of it. But though it may be so, the matter is more complex. It is of course true that cattle are by far the most valuable possessions of the Nuer, but, though doubtless their high value is an important consideration, we have to remember that it is not merely a question of relative value but also one of religious tradition and convention. Men and oxen have a symbolic equivalence in the logic of sacrifice, so that whatever is sacrificed is an 'ox'. If there were enough oxen one might always sacrifice an ox, and in symbol and by surrogate one does so; but as there are not enough, other offerings have to take their place and oxen be kept for the greater crises and those important ceremonial occasions when quantity of meat is a primary consideration. When an ox is sacrificed it is not just a matter of making the highest bid for divine favour when it is most needed, on the principle that the greater the gift the greater will be the return. This is evident from the fact that the victims in marriage ceremonies must be oxen, for here the ideas of substitution and exchange are least in evidence and the purpose of sacrifice is social rather than religious. Nor, in piacular sacrifices, should the holocaust be taken as evidence that it is simply a matter of the greater the need the greater must be the surrender, for when the carcasses of victims are abandoned to stave off plagues and murrains there is the idea of the evils entering into their bodies; and since the sacrifices are made on behalf of everybody no one can eat them. They are holy for all and not, as in some sacrifices where one half of the victim is abandoned, only for certain persons.

But valuable though his beasts are to Nuer and great the loss of them—even though he may feast on their carcasses he still loses them—they themselves freely explain that it is not so much what

782
121

is sacrificed that is important as the intentions of those who sacrifice. If a man is poor he will sacrifice a goat, or even a cucumber, in the place of an ox, and God will accept it. A man should give according to his circumstances, and the sacrifice is not less efficacious because it is a small thing. The emphasis is not on the receiving but on the giving, on the sincerity of intention. It is a question, Nuer say, of the heart or, as we would say, of disposition. It is clear, indeed, that if God is prepared to accept a cucumber instead of an ox it is not merely the thing itself which is significant, for a cucumber can have no use or value for him. We should fix our attention on the suppliant as well as on what he offers, for what he offers is not only whatever it may happen to be but also the expression of an interior state. If a cucumber costs man nothing and benefits God not at all, we have surely to seek deeper into the ideas of payment, substitution, or exchange for the meaning of sacrificial gifts.

All gifts are symbols of inner states, and in this sense one can only give oneself; there is no other kind of giving. This has often been said and in the sense in which it is said it is true. But the idea is a very complex one. When Nuer give their cattle in sacrifice they are very much, and in a very intimate way, giving part of themselves. What they surrender are living creatures, gifts more expressive of the self and with a closer resemblance to it than inanimate things, and these living creatures are the most precious of their possessions, so much so that they can be said to participate in them to the point of identification.

But it is not only in this rather general sense of identification of men with cattle that Nuer can be said to offer up themselves in offering up their cattle in sacrifice. We have seen that one of the chief features of their sacrifices is the rubbing of ashes along the backs of the victims. It is true that this may be regarded as an act of consecration but it is also, to a greater or lesser degree, an act of identification. Identification of sacrificer with victim is a common interpretation by ancient and modern writers on the subject. Indeed, it is quite explicit in some religions, in particular in certain Vedic, Hebrew, and Muslim rites, that what one consecrates and sacrifices is always oneself, and this is sometimes symbolically represented by laying of hands on the victim. It is an interpretation which makes good sense for Nuer piacular sacrifices. I have not, it is true, heard Nuer say that this is what the laying on of

782 121 hands means to them—it is our interpretation, what it means to us—but I have already given reasons for my conclusion that this meaning is implicit in their sacrifices also, and I do not think that their piacular sacrifices, where the life of an animal is substituted for the life of a man, are intelligible unless this is granted.[1]

But if a man gives himself in sacrifice he does so in the symbolism of substitution, in what Loisy calls a 'figuration' (*Essai historique sur le sacrifice*, 1920). He is acting a part in a drama. It is the ox which dies, not he. Once again, this is an old problem. In trying to solve it we must recall that the purpose of Nuer piacular sacrifices is either to get rid of some present evil or to ward off some threatening evil, and also that the evil is very often connected with ideas of sin, fault, and error, and hence with feelings of guilt. The notions of elimination, expulsion, protection, purification, and propitiation and expiation cannot easily be separated out in these sacrifices, though in any particular sacrifice it may be possible to say that one or other notion is most in evidence. The sense of fault is, as we have noted, clearly expressed in the sacrificial rites, in the confession of grievances and resentments, which is a feature of some sacrifices, and also in the sacrificial invocations, which must state a true account of everything which has led up to the crisis. But it is most clearly and dramatically expressed by the common practice of all present placing ashes on the back of a beast and then either washing them off or slaughtering it. Nuer say that what they are doing is to place all evil in their hearts on to the back of the beast and that it then flows into the earth with the water or the blood. This is not done in most piacular sacrifices, but in almost all such sacrifices someone places ashes on the victim's back on behalf of those for whom the sacrifice is being made; and Nuer say of the sacrifice that whatever evil has occasioned it is placed on the back of the victim and flows away with its blood into the earth. We have also seen how in some animal sacrifices, and always when a cucumber is sacrificed, the evil is said to go into the left half of the victim, which is therefore abandoned, and how in the case of other offerings they are entirely abandoned for the same reason. They are asking God to take away the evil and that the evil may be ransomed or expiated or wiped out with the victim. It is clear, therefore, that the laying on of hands is not only a consecration and an identification but also a transference on to the victim of the evil which troubles the sacrificer, and which, as we have noted earlier, is in a sense Spirit itself. It is put on to the victim and departs with its life. The victim thus has the role of scapegoat. This does not mean that the victim is made responsible for the evil. There is no suggestion of *poena vicaria*. The ox is not punished in the place of the man but is a substitute for him in the sense of representing him. In the laying on of hands the ideas of consecration, identification, and transference seem to be blended in the representation of a substitute. If this is so, it would follow that what the sacrificer is doing is to identify himself with the victim within the meaning of the transference. In other words, he identifies that part of himself which is evil with the victim so that in its death that part may be eliminated and flow away in its blood. As Gusdorf,[1] quoting Nietzsche, aptly remarks, 'en morale, l'homme ne se traite pas comme un *individuum*, mais comme un *dividuum*'. The same idea is expressed when in danger Nuer throw away as an offering to God something representing themselves and in substitution for themselves—a bead, a tassel, or some other small object of personal adornment or a lump of tobacco—that the evil may depart with it and they be spared.[2]

---

[1] It is quite explicit among the neighbouring Shilluk people. The Rev. D. S. Oyler ('The Shilluk Peace Ceremony', *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1920, p. 298) describes how in a sacrifice by their king he says in his invocation over the victim 'the flesh of this animal is as my flesh, and its blood is the same as my blood'. I asked Dr. Mary Smith to discuss with Nuer the rubbing of ashes on sacrificial victims in the light of what has been said about it in this chapter. Nuer told her that it was done to show God his animal and also so that the bad or evil would go out of them into the ox—they said it was '*lueli ni tek*', 'exchanging life' (life of man for life of beast). She concludes 'it certainly seems to me that you are right when you draw this conclusion from these actions and what they say'.

In sacrifice, then, some part of a man dies with the victim. It can be regarded both as an absolution and a rebirth; and also as a self-immolation (the psycho-analysts use the word 'suicide').[3] Fundamentally, however, if we have to sum up the meaning of Nuer sacrifice in a single word or idea, I would say that it is a substitu-

---

[1] Op. cit., p. 178.

[2] Dr. P. P. Howell (*A Manual of Nuer Law*, 1954, p. 218) has recorded a most interesting, and as far as I know unique, act of self-mutilation for the same purpose. An elder of some social standing committed an act of bestiality with a cow and was so overcome by shame and remorse that, in addition to sacrificing a beast, 'as an act of expiation he cut off one of his own fingers with a spear'. Dr. Mary Smith was told by Nuer that a man who committed such an act would take his own life.

[3] R. Money-Kyrle, *The Meaning of Sacrifice*, 1930, pp. 248, 252, *et passim*.

782 121 tion, *vita pro vita*. If it were not so it would be difficult to understand at all why offerings to God should be immolated. The life can only be given by its liberation through death, as Professor E. O. James emphasizes in his *Origins of Sacrifice*.[1] Substitution, a common enough interpretation of sacrifice,[2] is the central meaning of the rites—they are a giving or exchange or an expiation in that sense—whatever other ideas are mixed up in it or become attached to it.

But to sum up the meaning of Nuer piacular sacrifices in a single word scarcely does justice to the very complex set of ideas they express. We have found it necessary to use a variety of words in speaking of them: communion, gift, apotropaic rite, bargain, exchange, ransom, elimination, expulsion, purification, expiation, propitiation, substitution, abnegation, homage, and others. According to situation and particular purpose one element in this complex of meaning may be stressed in one rite and another element in another rite, or there are shifts in emphasis from one part of the sacrificial rite to another. The matter becomes yet more complicated and resistant to precise definition when we take into consideration the scale on which Spirit is figured to Nuer on different levels, and also their collective sacrifices, for in this chapter I have so far been discussing only sacrifices to God and only those made to him which belong to the piacular class.

III

782 776 In piacular sacrifices to God the *do ut des* notion, some sort of exchange or bargain, may never be entirely absent but it appears in a refined and sublimated form. The favour requested does not follow automatically the sacrifice, *ex opere operato*. God is not compelled by the sacrifice to grant it. It is indeed obvious, to Nuer as well as to us, that, apart from there being no means by which bargaining with God can be conducted, it is no use trying to haggle with him, because he is master of everything and can want nothing. Nor is there any idea that God is at fault if he does not give what is asked for in sacrifice; in his dealings with man he always has the *cuong*, is in the right. But when we examine sacri-

---

[1] 1933, *passim*. His interpretation, as I understand it, of primitive sacrifice in terms of the *do ut possis dare* motif does not, however, accord with Nuer ideas.

[2] Given, among anthropologists, some emphasis by Edward Westermarck (*The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas*, 1908, vol. ii, pp. 616 seq.).

fices to spirits of the air and of the earth the relations between 782
Spirit and man are somewhat different and colour the meaning 776
of the sacrifices accordingly. The lesser spirits are in competition, and if one of them has a cow dedicated to it its prestige is thereby increased. They do not, as God does, own all the beasts anyhow, but only those men give to them. This is why one dedicates beasts to the spirits but only rarely and in very special circumstances to God, for there is little point in giving him what is his already. Likewise, a sacrificed life, which is God's anyhow, is something spirits are thought to gain. Further, since God needs nothing he does not ask for anything. He does not demand sacrifices of men and cause them ill if they are not made. The spirits do. They demand attention, and they are not to be satisfied with cucumbers. They require bloody offerings. And if they are not given animal sacrifices they seize their devotees and make them sick. Nuer, therefore, do not hesitate to bargain with these spirits, speaking through their mediums, in a downright way which astonished me. The sense of the bargain is always the same: if we give you an ox or a sheep or a goat will you leave the sick man alone that he may recover; or what do you require of us this year in sacrifice that we may not be troubled by you? The lower in the scale is the conception of Spirit the more it is thought of as taking delight in what is offered.

Thus even though sacrifices to God and to the spirits may both have a piacular purpose and though the apotropaic element in both is very evident they cannot have precisely the same meaning. Even in piacular sacrifices to God there may be much variation of meaning, as, for example, between those in which the idea of expiation is most in evidence, such as those made to wipe out some definite sin like incest, and those made so that people may recover from wounds and ailments not attributed to specific offences and which, therefore, do not have the same moral connotation. But in either case the general attitude is the same. Man approaches God through sacrifice and asks for aid. It is man and not God who benefits by the sacrifice. Man's attitude in these sacrifices contrasts with his attitude in the case of sacrifices to spirits who have seized people to exact gifts from them or may do so if they are not satisfied. It is true that men generally have a feeling that the spirits would not have troubled them if they had been given their due and that their devotees have only themselves to blame if they have

16: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1956
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

782 776 neglected them, and also that men give to the spirits for the same reason that they often give to God, that they may be left alone. But the psychology of gifts to spirits is different. Here the substitution is blended with the idea of propitiation and satisfaction rather than of expiation or solicitation for aid, and the experience is on a different level of thought. Man does not wrestle with God, but here man and a spirit are pitted against one another, and the huckstering is conducted through a human agency—is, in fact, between humans, between the sacrificer and the representative of a spirit, a prophet and generally a very minor one. God has no such representatives. The leopard-skin priests are men's representatives to him, not his representatives to men. We are here faced again with the problem of the one and the many; and we see in these differences of attitude in sacrifices to God and in those made to lesser spirits a facet of the ambiguity of the idea of Spirit, the source of good and ill, as represented in the paradox of unity and plurality.

782 Thus we see that in Nuer sacrifice there are different shades of meaning. The pattern varies. There are shifts of emphasis. Any attempt to present a general interpretation, to put forward a simple formula to cover all Nuer sacrifices, meets with further difficulty when we turn to the collective and confirmatory sacrifices. Here the intention is clearly different. God, or whichever of his refractions may be involved, is not angry and therefore does not have to be propitiated. No sin has been committed which must be expiated, and there is no situation requiring expiation in the broader sense of payment to be rid of a state of danger due to the presence of Spirit. Life is not usually endangered so there is no need for substitution. Initiations and weddings are occasions of mirth, and even mortuary ceremonies, though they are solemn occasions, mark the end of mourning and therefore have a joyous side to them. There may always be some element of anxiety in these *rites de passage*, and perhaps also—it is difficult to say—of a feeling of the possibility of fault. In some confirmatory sacrifices, those concerned with death, these elements are manifest, but in others, such as marriage ceremonies, they are not evident and the stress is rather on ensuring the success of a social activity and validating it. As I have said earlier, we cannot make a rigid distinction between the one type of sacrifice and the other. Mortuary sacrifices might be placed in either class, according to the point of view.

But in initiation and marriage ceremonies the sacrifices are only incidents in a succession of ceremonial acts, and they have a maximum of festal, and a minimum of religious, significance. The sacrifice adds strength to what is being accomplished by other means and it provides a meal for those attending what is primarily a social gathering, so much so that those who have a right to the carcass of the victim in marriage sacrifices may demand that a bigger ox be slaughtered than that provided. In these ceremonies we have to distinguish between the religious rite of sacrifice and the secular rites and ceremonial acts which it accompanies and sacralizes, and both from the feasting on porridge and beer and the flesh of the sacrificial victims and other acts of simple sociability. A boy is initiated into manhood by the making of six incisions across his forehead and by various other acts of a ritual and ceremonial character. The sacrifice is something extra added to these acts which protects the lad from harm, makes God and the ghosts witnesses of his change of status, and provides a feast for the living witnesses, his ever-hungry kinsmen and neighbours. Likewise in marriage, though sacrifices must be made to mark and secure the completion of the stages leading to the full union of man and wife as well as to give the visiting relatives-in-law a meal, the union itself is brought about mainly by other than religious acts: payment of bridewealth, wedding ceremonial and festivities, and so forth. The sacrifices form only a part of the whole series of ritual and other activities, and a part in which the religious content is reduced to a minimum, the movements of the sacrifice being conducted in a perfunctory manner. To indicate the place of the religious element in the total event, one might perhaps compare it among ourselves to grace before a festal meal on some important ceremonial occasion. There is, therefore, a difference of attitude and hence of meaning between the collective and the personal sacrifices. We must suppose that in the laying on of hands in the former by representatives of the lineages which offer up the victims the ideas of identification and of transference of evil are not so prominent as in the piacular sacrifices.

782

Yet we cannot exclude these killings from the general category of sacrifice. We can, nevertheless, say that the most typical collective and confirmatory sacrifices, those sacrifices which lack, at any rate to any marked degree, piacular significance, are least important to an understanding of the character of Nuer religion. The

782 role of this religion in the regulation of the social life, its structural role, is subsidiary to its role in the regulation of the individual's relations with God, its personal role. The two roles are of different orders and have different functions, and it is the second which has the greater interest for us, for though Nuer religious activity is part of their social life and takes place within it they conceive it as expressing essentially a relationship between man and something which lies right outside his society; and it is, therefore, within the framework of that conception that our study of their religion has to be made and its central act of sacrifice has to be understood.

CHAPTER XII

PRIESTS AND PROPHETS

I

It has been noted that women do not make sacrifice and that 782
though any man can make it only senior men who are fathers of families, 'bulls' as the Nuer call them, do so. Personal sacrifices are usually, as in most cases of sickness, performed by the head of the family or some senior kinsman and neighbour, but sacrifices which have more than domestic import and are thought of as involving a whole lineage or clan—collective sacrifices—have to be performed by a person called *gwan buthni*, whom I have spoken of as the master of ceremonies.

The verb *buth* means 'to share', and since collateral lineages of 613
a clan and also clans with common ancestry may claim portions 614
of the flesh of sacrificial victims at each other's collective sacrifices, 727
there is said to be *buth* between them. They are to one another 782
jibuthni, people who share. The word is also used when speaking of the adoption of a captured Dinka into his captor's lineage. He is said to be *lath buthni*, given shares. A sacrifice is made and in the invocation at it the guardian spirit of the lineage is asked to receive the Dinka into its care and the ghosts of the ancestors are informed of what is being done. The Dinka is smeared with the victim's chyme. He now counts as a member of his captor's lineage and has a right to partake of the meats of its sacrifices and also to claim a portion of the meat at sacrifices by any other lineage to which this lineage stands in a *buth* relationship. *Buth* has consequently the further meaning of agnation. *Jibuthni* are agnates. *Lath buthni* is to be given agnation. Agnates are people who share in the flesh of sacrifices.

Buth relationship is stated also in terms of the division of 613
elephant tusks or of cattle exchanged for them. When hunters 614
kill an elephant the right tusk goes to the *koc*, the man who first 224
speared it, and the left tusk to the *gam*, the man who speared it [301]
next. The tusks are cut into portions to be used as armlets—one of the most precious of Nuer possessions—or are exchanged for

613 614 224 cattle, and the portions of ivory or the cattle are divided among those relatives of the spearsmen who receive cattle of bridewealth and bloodwealth and the flesh of sacrifices. Those standing in a *buth* relationship to the spearsmen also have rights in the tusks. This means in practice that a section of the tusk, or its equivalent in cattle, goes to the particular *thok mac*, minimal lineage, of the spearsman's clan to which the *gwan buthni*, master of ceremonies, of his family belongs, and it is this man who gets it.[1]

782 613 593 Each family has its master of ceremonies, who is a member of a lineage collateral to that of its head and therefore one of his distant agnatic kinsmen. A son takes his father's place in this service. The same man may act on behalf of the heads of several families of the same minimal lineage, and one of his close agnatic kin may act in his stead, since he carries out his functions not as an individual but as representative of a group. The office is not necessarily reciprocal, for a man may act as master of ceremonies to a family of one collateral lineage and have as master of ceremonies to his own family a man of a different collateral lineage. Also, a family may have more than one master of ceremonies, the second belonging to a different collateral lineage from the first. Moreover, it would seem that if one of the persons who usually acts in this capacity is not available his place may be taken by any distant kinsman who can be held to represent him. Nuer are very latitudinarian in such matters; but the point we have to note is that on certain occasions a whole clan or large lineage offers up the sacrifice, and the officiant ought then to be someone outside the family and close kin most immediately concerned who represents the interest of the wider group, which participates in the sacrifice through him.

782 613 A master of ceremonies functions at weddings, mortuary and *colwic* ceremonies, settlements of blood-feuds, adoptions, initiations, severings of kinship to allow intermarriage or cohabitation, the building of new byres, and the division of elephant tusks. On these occasions he calls out the clan or lineage spear-name and then makes an invocation, usually prior to animal sacrifice. By calling out the spear-name he identifies the whole clan or lineage with the offering. When the victim has been killed he cuts through the scrotum (*juak tem*), this being the commencement of the skin-

---

[1] See also P. P. Howell, 'A Note on Elephants and Elephant Hunting among the Nuer', *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1945.

ning in ordinary sacrifices at which he officiates; and Nuer often 782
refer to him in his sacrificial role as 'the cutter of the scrotum'. 613
Does this usage symbolize the principle of agnation? Possibly, for [727]
after the sacrifice by which a Dinka is adopted into his captor's
lineage it is said '*ca juak tem*', 'the scrotum has been cut', to signify
that the Dinka is now a member of the lineage. If we are right in
thinking that it may have this meaning, then the cutting of the
scrotum is a most appropriate symbolic act, for the *gwan buthni*
represents, as a member of a collateral lineage, the unity of the
clan as a corporation of segments, the principle of fission which is
in the very nature of a lineage structure. The master of ceremonies
receives some of the sacrificial meat at sacrifices at which he officiates
and he generally has a right also to the hide or half of it. He
has also a right, as I have explained, to a section of any elephant
tusk that comes into possession of the family he serves, and the
first turtles and the skins of the first leopards and serval cats killed
by its sons are given to him. He receives a calf or sheep from the
husband's people when one of its daughters is married.

The role of the *gwan buthni* in sacrifice is seen to be a social 782
role rather than one of a specifically religious kind. He does not
function in virtue of any qualities in himself. He is a *dwek*, a
layman, not a *kuaar*, a priest. He is called upon to make the first
invocation when the sacrifice concerns the interest of a whole
clan or lineage. His clan or lineage alone is involved or if as in
marriage, another clan is also involved he acts on behalf of his
own group alone; and consequently he addresses Spirit in the
refraction by which it is represented to the clan—maybe in a
totemic refraction or just as '*kwoth gwara*', 'God of our fathers'.
His role in the proceedings is, therefore, determined primarily by
the nature of the social activities in connexion with which he is
asked to make sacrifice and not by any specifically religious considerations.

II

When sacrifice is made in consequence of some sin or to end 782
certain states of interdiction, of sin-potential—in circumstances, 793
that is, which involve the notion of *nueer* or of notions akin to it—
it is desirable, and sometimes necessary, for the rite to be performed
by a *kuaar twac* or *kuaar muon*, a priest of the leopard-skin

782 or of the earth. It might seem that it is in no way here the nature
793 of the social group involved which requires an officiant from outside the family and close kin, but the nature of the circumstances which occasion the sacrifice, circumstances which call for consecration and invocation to be made by someone with special religious qualities. Nevertheless, as will shortly be evident, although the exclusive sacrificial functions by which priestly office is defined have a special sacramental character, they arise, like those ideas of sin with which they are particularly concerned, from situations which require for full understanding a knowledge of the social structure.

793 When the Government of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan first began to take an interest in the Nuer the attention of its officers was at once drawn to what became known as 'leopard-skin chiefs', for these men were distinguished from the rest of the Nuer by the leopard-skins they wore over their shoulders (Plate XIV). It was thought that they were some kind of 'chiefs' or, in the language of those days, 'shaikhs' or 'sultans' through whom the Government might conduct its administration. It soon became apparent, however, that they lacked any real authority; and it is clear that, although the exercise of their religious functions has an important political role, they have no political, administrative, or judicial office. I have discussed the political significance of their religious functions in *The Nuer*,[1] and I limit further discussion of them here to what is necessary for an understanding of the topics treated in the present book.

The word which Europeans have translated 'chief' and which I translate 'priest' is *kuaar* (pl. *kuar*).[2] This person is often referred to as *kuaar twac*, priest of the (leopard-) skin, or as *gwan twac*, possessor of the (leopard-) skin, on account of the leopard-skin he wears over his shoulders. In its original sense the word *kuaar* conveys to Nuer a category of persons with traditional ritual functions. Its opposite is *dwek* (pl. *dueghni*), an ordinary person who has no such functions, a layman. Used by itself the word *kuaar* would normally, perhaps invariably, mean for a Nuer a leopard-skin priest, but combined with other words it may be used

---

[1] Chap. iv.

[2] He is referred to in all government files as 'leopard-skin chief', and rather than make for local confusion I used this designation in my reports and later, with a caveat, in my earlier books. In a book on Nuer religion I feel that a title should be used which indicates better his religious character.

they happen to reside. Moreover, persons who do not belong to a 793
priestly family can become priests, transmitting their powers to 613
their children, by what the Nuer call *tetde*, by hand. This means 614
that such a man is given a leopard-skin by a priest and told to carry out priestly services. In some myths of origin of the Jikany tribes the leopard-skin was given by the ancestors of the dominant lineages to their maternal uncles that they might serve as tribal priests. The structurally opposed lineages of the clan were then in the common relationship of sisters' sons to the line of priests, which thus had a mediatory position between them.[1] A layman is still today sometimes invested with the leopard-skin and the priestly powers that go with it, and I have known a Dinka chosen for the purpose. This in itself teaches us much about the way Nuer regard their priests. Priestly duties are tiresome and ill-rewarded, but somebody has to perform them. Nuer society is very far from being a hierocracy.

The chief services a priest performs are in connexion with homi- 793
cide and the importance of his office derives from this essential 628
function. Only he can perform these services,[2] which are to release the slayer from the state of extreme danger his act has placed him in and, where circumstances are such that an active blood-feud is likely to develop if a settlement is not reached, to give the slayer sanctuary, to negotiate a settlement, to perform sacrifice to enable normal social relations to be resumed, and to rehabilitate the slayer. All these functions, in addition to having a political significance, are also essentially religious acts or derive from the priest's sacred character.

As soon as a man kills another he hastens to the nearest priest, 782 ●
who draws the point of a fishing-spear down his right arm from 793
where it joins the shoulder and sacrifices a beast, called *yang riem*, 628
the cow of blood. Were the slayer to eat or drink before this has 783
been done it would be serious *nueer* and cause certain death, for the blood which is drawn is thought to be in some way that of the slain man which has passed into him. If there is likelihood of blood-vengeance the slayer then takes sanctuary in the home of

---

[1] I recorded this fact in *Sudan Notes and Records* (1935, pp. 46–48), but I have only recently realized, in the light of Dr. Lienhardt's research among the Dinka, the significance of it.

[2] Except perhaps on such rare occasions as when a priest himself or one of his family is killed. I was told that then an elder of the aristocratic clan of the tribe might act in the priest's place.

●782 the priest, his family and cattle being dispersed to homes of kins-
793 men, leaving his homestead deserted. He will not be molested
628 there because of the sacred character of the priesthood. For the
783 same reason the priest and any who accompany him can move between the parties without fear and so conduct negotiations for settlement. It is essential that a blood-feud be settled if the parties to it live in the same neighbourhood, not only for reasons of security, but also on account of the serious danger both the dead man's kin and the slayer's kin are placed in by the homicide, a danger in which the whole community is involved. Settlement by payment of compensation (*cut*) to the family and kin of the dead man prevents them from taking vengeance and thus causing a further disturbance of social life. It also pacifies the ghost, who may trouble his family and kin if a wife is not soon married to his name with *ghok thunga*, cattle of blood-guilt. Consequently, even when a man is slain by a close paternal kinsman cattle, though fewer, have to be paid to provide him with heirs, and if vengeance is taken and a man on each side is killed compensation has to be paid for both so that their names may not be blotted out. The payment is rather for this purpose than to satisfy honour. Only vengeance can do that. This is why the kin, even when they are ready to accept compensation, at first refuse it, and why, even after acceptance, a feud is always liable to break out again. But neither consideration seems to weigh with Nuer so much as the need to rid themselves of the condition of *nueer*. This threatens chiefly the kin of the slain, but the kin of the slayer, the wives of both lots of kin, and all their neighbours are also subject to interdiction. If either side eats or drinks with the other or from vessels which the other has used the penalty is death, and it may be brought on kinsmen on either side by a person who belongs to neither party eating or drinking in the homes of both. This intolerable state of interdiction can only be ended by sacrifice by a priest when compensation has been paid, since it requires the consent of both parties. We have, therefore, to distinguish between the cattle paid to compensate the kin of the dead for their loss and to provide the ghost with a wife from those paid for sacrifice, just as we had to distinguish between the cattle paid in indemnity for adultery and the beast paid for sacrifice. This is shown by the fact that should a man kill his wife, though no compensation can be exacted and the question of providing heirs does not arise, he will hand over

to her kin the beasts required for sacrifice to get rid of the state of 782
uncleanness resulting from the homicide. We have here to dis- 793
tinguish also the priest's role in making these sacrifices, which 628
only he can perform and the performance of which is the essen- 783
tially priestly role in blood-feuds, from the sanctuary he provides and the mediation he offers. The first is a sacramental act only a priest can perform; the others are acts he can perform because people, as we would say, have respect for the cloth. It is a distinction between priestly office and priestly status. In certain cases, as in those of accidental homicide, neither sanctuary nor mediation would be required of him; but it is always necessary that he makes the customary sacrifices if the state of *nueer* is to be ended, and it must be ended if the parties have to come into contact with each other in the course of their ordinary social life. Although today the Government exacts compensation for homicide and takes charge of the slayer, priestly sacrifice is still required before a blood-feud can be settled.

I am not certain about all the details of procedure in settlement of a blood-feud, and they probably vary from one part of Nuerland to another and even from one case to another, but the main, and usual, actions are as follows.[1]

When, usually after some months (the mortuary ceremony for the dead man having first been held), negotiations have been completed and the cattle brought together from the homes of the various kinsmen who have contributed to the payment the priest, accompanied by some of his kinsmen, and when relations are not too strained by a representative of the slayer's party, drives them to a place near the home of the dead man, where his kinsmen have gathered. When, after inspection, all are accepted they are tethered in a neighbouring homestead as they may not enter the kraal of the dead man's family till sacrifices have been made. One of the oxen, called *yang ketha*, the cow of the gall-bladder, is consecrated by the priest, who then makes an invocation over it to God that the feud may be closed. In the course of it he addresses also the ghost of the dead man and tells him that his death has been paid for and that his kinsmen will marry a wife to his name to bear him a son. The priest then slays the victim and as soon as

---

[1] For a fuller account see H. C. Jackson, op. cit., pp. [illegible]; my book *The Nuer*, pp. 152 seqq.; J. P. Crazzolara, op. cit., pp. [illegible] seqq.; and P. P. Howell, *A Manual of Nuer Law*, chap. II.

782 793 625 783 it has fallen the dead man's kin hack it to pieces in a wild scramble. The gall-bladder is extracted and placed on one side. This is later squeezed into a gourd containing water and a little milk and is drunk by members of the dead man's family and paternal and maternal kin and, if one is present, by the representative of the slayer's party. The priest gives them also cleansing medicines, *wal nueera*, to drink. After this ceremony the parties can eat and drink together without risk, though if feelings have run high they are unlikely, for reasons of sentiment, to do so. Were at any time before it is performed a man inadvertently to break the interdiction a priest would be summoned to save his life by sacrifice and medicines.

Next day before sunrise the dead man's kin go to where the cattle of compensation have spent the night in a neighbouring homestead and sacrifice the one entire bull among them and cook and eat its flesh. The cattle may now be brought into the dead man's homestead and their milk drunk. Some of them are later distributed among the dead man's paternal and maternal kin while the rest are entrusted to relatives to look after, or are temporarily tethered in his kraal, until they are used to marry him a wife, the bride cohabiting with his brother. It is unlikely that all the cattle will have been handed over at the ceremony for closing the feud. The last ones to be paid, maybe years later, are the *ghok pale loc*, the cattle of relieving the heart, and a beast known as *yang tul cuka*, the cow of the breaking of the bone, because after it is sacrificed one of its bones is held at either end by representatives of the two parties while the priest severs it in two. The left half of the bone is thrown away. The two parties then consume the flesh together. The earlier ceremony ended the state of *nueer*, and the purpose of this later ceremony seems to be to bring the parties into amity again. These final cattle may not be paid, and the final ceremony therefore not be held, if the parties to the feud do not strongly feel the need for a lasting settlement.

The state of feud, which is a state not only of social conflict but also of spiritual danger, was ended by the sacrifice of the *yang ketha*. But the priest still has a duty to perform, to bring the man who incurred the blood-guilt back into the life of the community. The cutting of his arm put him out of immediate and acute danger, but the death he has caused still clings to him till these final rites, which are like those which end a period of mourning.

The priest and one or two of his kinsmen escort the slayer to his 782
neglected home where huts and byre are in disrepair and grass 793
has grown up in courtyard and kraal. He consecrates an ox, preferably 628
a black one or one with black markings, utters an invocation 783
to God, saying that compensation has been paid and sacrifice made to remove the state of feud and asking that the slayer may now rest in peace in his own home. He sacrifices the ox, known as *yang miem*, the cow of the hair, because afterwards he cuts the slayer's hair or a token lock of it. It has not been cut or tended since the homicide. The priest then starts to hoe up the weeds in the kraal, and he and his kinsmen to clean up the homestead. He also kindles fire with fire-sticks (*piec mac*), lights three fires, sacrifices a goat, removes its intestinal fat, and places a piece of it on each fire where the flames consume it. The slayer is now rid of the *thung*, the blood-guilt, and can repair his byre and huts and settle down to normal life.

The leopard-skin priest also conducts the taking of oaths. A 793
Nuer may at any time lick a spear or metal bracelet as a sign that 628
he is speaking the truth, and I was told that a man would not do 695
so if he were lying, though he might pretend to lick it. But formal rites of purgation are conducted by a priest. If a man denies that he has killed another he undergoes an ordeal by drinking milk from the herd of the dead man handed to him by the priest in the presence of the dead man's kin. Should he be lying he would die of *nueer*. To kill a man and not to confess to the killing is a heinous offence in Nuer eyes because it puts the kin on both sides in jeopardy. In questions other than homicide, which would usually, 793
I think, concern rights in cattle, the priest digs a hole, representing 695
a grave, and accuser and accused either step over it or take hold of the shaft of the priest's spear placed above it as they make their declarations. Or the declarations are made by them as they sit on the priest's leopard-skin. The priest then utters an invocation over a tethered victim that whoever is lying will die. The late Mr. Hamer, who witnessed this rite, told me that the priest caught the blood of the beast, a goat, in a gourd and mixed it with earth scraped from the ground in front of the skin. He placed a lump of this mixture in the mouths of the two men, who chewed and swallowed it. They then stood up and, facing one another, stepped across the skin. In a text written by a Nuer at the American mission, and sent to me by Dr. Mary Smith, the priest first addresses

793 the victim, a sheep: 'now, sheep, thy blood is shed to death on
695 account of the man who is at fault'. He then calls on God: 'O God of heaven, God of our fathers, God who created all things, God of the universe, God of the flesh (*ring*), I call on thee to look upon these persons, that the man who is at fault may die. Now, I know that thou, O God, listenest to my speech (*rietda*).' If a guilty man who has taken an oath that he is innocent falls sick he gets the priest to sacrifice for him and give him medicines, promising reparation for the wrong he has done.

793 A leopard-skin priest is also, at any rate usually, called in to
782 sacrifice an ox if close relations commit incest. In cases of slighter incest, between, that is, persons more distantly related, some lesser
835 specialist, a diviner, or just the head of the family, performs the sacrifice, or the man who has committed incest himself sacrifices a cucumber or cuts in two the fruit of a sausage-tree. The priest consecrates the ox, makes an invocation over it to God that he may spare the partners to the sin and that the offence may depart with the blood of the victim. The beast is then held down on the ground and the priest inserts the point of his spear in its throat and cuts towards the breast. He severs the beast in twain, hacking its head in two with an axe. As he makes the final cuts the parties to the offence tug at the carcass on either side and pull it apart. One half is eaten by the priest and his friends and the other by the relatives of the principals, the principals themselves abstaining. The priest squeezes out the gall from the victim's gall-bladder into water in a gourd, adds *wal ruali*, incest-medicine, and the principals and their relatives drink this mixture.

793 Sacrifices in connexion with homicide, ordeals, and, at least usually, serious incest are the exclusive domain of the leopard-
782 skin priest. If he is called on to make sacrifice on other occasions it is because it is felt that his doing so adds weight to the intention; but it is not necessary that he should act and unless he happens to be a neighbour it is unlikely that he would be summoned.

Since a good deal has been written about the importance of
[793] 'rain-makers' in this part of Africa it is perhaps wise to note also
789 that the leopard-skin priest is never spoken about in relation to rain. When questioned, Nuer say that he might be asked to sacrifice for rain and to perform some other and minor ritual acts, such as putting a hyena's skull in water, to the same purpose; but they make it clear that they attach no great importance to these pro-